Norby

The Norby Chronicles - 2

Isaac Asimov
Janet Asimov

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Isaac Asimov, Janet Asimov

Norby's Other Secret

to the beautiful younger generation
Patti
Leslie
Nanette
Robyn

1. Danger

Jefferson Wells sat in front of the main computer screen, trying to keep his mind on Earth history.

"Hey, Norby," he called out, "I hope you're fixing the kitchen computer without making things worse. Albany Jones and my brother, Fargo, will be here soon and I don't want to leave the Roman republic again just because the chicken has to be basted."

No one answered.

"Norby?" Jeff made it to the kitchen in a fast stride-his legs were long for a fourteen-year-old-and found no one fixing the computer or attending to the cooking.

Jeff shook his head. He knew lots of people with personal robots, but he was the only one blessed with a mixed-up robot. He basted the chicken in a hurry, muttering to himself. Then he hastened back through the living room and into the bedroom.

There, in front of the other terminal of the main computer was Norby, his back eyes firmly shut. Jeff could tell from the dim reflection in the computer screen that Norby's second pair of eyes were open on the other side of his head. Those eyes were staring at words that moved down the screen almost rapidly enough to blur, for Norby could read faster than most people could think. This was especially true when he closed one pair of eyes in order to concentrate entirely with the other pair.

Norby's body-a metal barrel about sixty centimeters high-teetered back and forth on his fully extended legs, the feet of which were symmetrical fore and back. His multi-joined arms, just as fully extended, had hands that also faced both ways. One of those hands remained pressed dramatically to his barrel torso. The other flung itself away suddenly, in a gesture common among politicians and actors.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen," intoned Norby in a voice a little too deep to be natural to him, the words sounding through a hidden speaker in his unremovable domed hat. Norby always talked through his hat, which lifted only far enough to show his four remarkably human eyes. He proceeded to raise his outstretched arm and point at the computer terminal as if it were an audience.

"Lend me your ears, I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him…"

"I'll bury you." Jeff said, "if you don't fix the kitchen computer in a hurry."

Norby opened his back eyelids and blinked at Jeff. "It's such a boring machine, Jeff. It doesn't know any Shakespeare."

"I think that means you haven't figured out how to repair it yet."

"And it doesn't like me. It thinks I'm alien."

"The kitchen computer has no feelings and practically no brains. There's no use bragging to it about how your first owner put alien parts in you."

"Oh," said Norby. "Then don't you think I should avoid associating with inferior machines? Don't you think I should improve the quality of my mental data bank by studying?"

Jeff groaned. "You could at least study real history. All you do is indulge yourself in Shakespeare or try to remember how to get to whatever alien planet your alien parts came from."

"Well, you won't find it. You humans haven't even settled beyond your own solar system, and you haven't developed telepathy…"

"Great galaxy! What's the use of you being able to communicate with me telepathically if you're not going to use it to help me learn history quicker?" Jeff stomped back to the kitchen and set about mashing the potatoes, a job the kitchen computer was supposed to do.

Norby pattered after Jeff, his telescopic legs almost completely withdrawn so that he seemed very small and humble. "You don't seem grateful that I succeeded in helping you pass the Martian Swahili exam."

"Right now I need help with history," said Jeff, thumping the bowl so hard that a bit of unmashed potato flew up and hit him on the nose. Exasperated, Jeff rolled his eyes upward and saw that more potato was stuck on the ceiling. "For a supposed teaching robot, you probably haven't learned one bit of history yourself."

"I have too. I'll prove it to you."

Jeff never had a chance to ask Norby what he meant, because at that moment the door speaker buzzed to attract attention. Then it announced, "Cadet Wells-Admiral Yobo is here to see you."

"He's here, on Earth? To see-me? Let him in!"

Jeff dashed into the living room, forgetting the large plastic apron he had tied around his waist. Norby, retracting his legs all the way inside his barrel, made use of his personal antigrav to sail through the air beside him.

Jeff's legs tangled with a scatter rug and he sat down abruptly, while Norby hovered over his head and made an odd sound.

"Are you laughing at me?" Jeff asked through clenched teeth.

"That's an interesting question," said Norby. "Let me see if the facts correlate. Number one, I do have emotive circuits, and number two, you do look rather funny…"

"That's enough," said Jeff, scrambling to his feet. "Robots manufactured in this solar system do not have emotive circuits or a perverted sense of humor. I order you to go into the bedroom, and

don't come out until you've learned history-or how to cook."

Norby shut his back eyes at Jeff, went into the bedroom, and slammed the door shut.

"Hello, Admiral," Jeff said as he opened the door to the hall. "Welcome to my apartment."

Boris Yobo was big and his enormous black hand engulfed Jeff's in a hearty shake that seemed to loosen Jeff's shoulder from his body.

"Cadet," he rumbled, "where's that brother of yours? I haven't been able to reach him." Yobo took off a plain civilian coat to reveal a splendid uniform, weighed down with solid rows of medals, most of which could be worn only by the head of the Federation's Space Command.

Jeff was sure that Admiral Yobo was not in the habit of paying calls on Space Academy cadets-not even orphaned ones-nor even on their older brothers who happened to work as agents for the Space Command. Especially unannounced calls. "Fargo should be here soon for dinner, Admiral."

Yobo sniffed. "Whatever it is, it smells good after the synthomeals they've been feeding me at the meetings I've been attending. If we continue to eat those meals we'll never work out ways of controlling this new batch of pirates plundering the solar system. In fact, I'd be tempted to join them myself."

He sniffed again. "Your Earth food doesn't have quite the tang of the stuff we grow under domes in the Mars Colony. Personally, I don't think you Earth people know how to season properly. Shall I demonstrate?"

"It's almost done, sir," Jeff said, "so it's too late for improvements." Admiral Yobo was known for his exotic gourmet taste in food, and once a dish suited his fancy, it was inedible to anyone else. "Would it be all right for me to know why you are here?"

"Smells like roast chicken."

"And left-over meatloaf. Albany Jones is coming, too."

"You can have the meatloaf, but the chicken would suit me well. I suppose, Cadet, you want to know why I didn't phone first."

Yobo sat on the couch heavily and didn't wait for Jeff to reply. "For all I know," he said, "your phone is tapped by spies from the Inventors Union. They're a difficult, proud and powerful group, and they're determined to get the secret of miniaturized-antigravity devices like Norby's. That's why I've come here secretly to warn you that the Inventors Union may try to kidnap your robot. Maybe soon."

"No!" said Jeff. "They'll want to take Norby apart. I'm not going to let them."

Yobo said, "The Inventors Union is working around the clock to discover how to make miniantigrav units, and they're getting

impatient. So are some others. Everyone's tired of antigrav units so big that only a six-person vehicle can accommodate them. Even I'm tired of them. Now either that old, mad spacer, McGillicuddy, invented miniantigrav, or he found it on an alien spaceship that nobody else can find and used it when he constructed Norby. Since McGillicuddy's been dead for years, there's only Norby left to work with. You know, Jeff, I'm fond of Norby, but surely you understand that the needs of the Federation…"

"Norby doesn't know how he does it, Admiral, and he doesn't remember an alien ship."

"He doesn't have to know or remember. My scientists at the Space Command could analyze his workings down to subatomic levels…"

"No'" said Jeff. "No-sir! I won't allow it. Norby is my property." He shoved both hands through his curly brown hair.

The phone rang with the family call signal.

Relieved at the interruption, Jeff said, "Wells answering."

The screen lit up to show Farley Gordon Wells-twenty-four-years-old, athletically wiry, a little taller than Jeff, his eyes blue, his hair wavy and dark. Behind Fargo was a strikingly attractive girl in a Manhattan police uniform. She was beautiful, and she looked happy in a way (it seemed to Jeff) that most women looked when they were around Fargo.

"Hello, kid monster," said Fargo. "I'm still at the precinct. I'm afraid I'll be late."

"Hello, geriatrics case," said Jeff. "You always are."

"Albany's fault. Her professional responsibilities required her to foil a holdup with some high-powered karate, which made it necessary for her to change uniforms and…" Fargo's eyebrows suddenly elevated. "Is that Admiral Yobo behind you? What have I done?"

"Probably a great deal," said Yobo, "but nothing I'm aware of at the moment. This is a social call. Space home life gets boring, even in a spome as big as Space Command. Don't you remember my suggesting dinner when I was in New York for meetings?"

Fargo's eyebrows came down and closed together, "Is this the week you're having meetings in Manhattan? When I'm in love?"

"Just for this week?" asked Albany, her beautiful eyes crinkling.

"Bring some TGAF candy with you when you come, Fargo," said Jeff.

"Sure," said Fargo, with a grin. "You'd better start dinner without us, though I won't be expecting too much left over with the Admiral there."

The phone shut off.

"TGAF," said Jeff, "is our private family code. It stands for 'The

Game's A-Foot'. It means trouble so Fargo understands that you're here on business, not a social call."

Yobo sighed, and sat down at the table. "I know that private family code of yours. I wish you had one that indicates big trouble, because your romantic brother believes he can always talk himself out of danger, and we may need more than talk this time."

"Are we going to need weapons?" asked Jeff.

"I'm not sure, but we had better be ready. I don't know when or where-or even, if-the Inventors Union is likely to strike, but we've got to prepare for the worst." The admiral stopped talking and sniffed. "You're letting the chicken dry out," he said.

"Norby," called Jeff, "serve the chicken!"

There was no answer and Jeff flung open the bedroom door. "That crazy barrel has gone again!"

"Taken off into hyperspace?" asked Yobo.

"He must have. I hurt his feelings-or maybe he needed to refuel. That's where he does it. What are we going to do?"

"About Norby? Nothing. The chicken comes first," said Yobo, heading for the kitchen.

During dinner, Jeff managed to make his way through half a drumstick with an almost total lack of appetite as he waited for Norby to return. Finally he said, "Sir, I'm afraid that Norby may have overheard you. He's a pretty brave robot, but he does have this prejudice against being taken apart, and he may have gone into hyperspace to save himself. I can't communicate with him when he's there, and he's supposed to tell me when he's going."

"Indeed?" said Yobo, who had already demolished his drumstick and a mountain of mashed potatoes and was slicing himself a helping of white meat. "Since there's nothing we can do about it, let's finish dinner. I'm sure he'll come back because it will get lonely out there after a while." Admiral Yobo attacked the chicken again. Between bites he said, "But see here. Everyone knows about Norby's personal antigrav. But only you and your brother and I know about Norby's secret ability to enter hyperspace with his built-in hyperdrive mechanism. If the greedy Inventors Union finds out about his hyperdrive, added to his miniantigrav, they'll tear the solar system apart to get it."

"Fargo thinks Norby's ability to travel in hyperspace is related to his miniantigrav," Jeff said. "So it's all one secret talent of Norby's."

"What Fargo thinks doesn't mean a thing. The only way to keep the Inventors Union away from Norby is to arrange to have my own scientists…"

"Please, sir-"

"Cadet," thundered Yobo, "you know that eventually someone has

to examine Norby, and it might as well be my scientists. He's too valuable to be just the pet robot of a boy."

Jeff stared at the admiral in horror. He's the enemy, too, he thought to himself. What do I do?

There was no time to wonder if any answer to that question existed because at that moment there was a loud thump in the bedroom.

"Norby?" asked Jeff, getting up from his chair. He felt a wash of relief sweep over him at the thought that his robot might be back. Yet a feeling of fear came almost immediately afterward at the thought of what Yobo might do.

Following the thump, however, there was a more complicated noise, a very strange one. Strange, that is, to be heard in an apartment in the sovereign nation of Manhattan, USA sector of the Terran Federation.

"Jeff, that was a rather disturbing growl," Yobo said. "Have you got an animal in there? It sounded like a large one."

"Not that I know of, sir…Norby!"

A small barrel shot out of the bedroom into Jeff's outstretched arms. Norby's hat tilted back and a pair of wide-open eyes looked up.

"It's not my fault!" said Norby.

Jeff's lips tightened. Norby said that frequently, and usually, it wasn't true.

Something followed Norby into the living room. It was sand-colored. It looked hungry. And it had the beginnings of a mane.

"Space and time!" said Yobo, in a husky whisper, "it's a lion. I've been meaning to get around to visiting the Africa of my ancestors, but I have no great desire to have this portion of it visit me."

"Norby, what have you done?" Jeff asked, scarcely able to force the words out.

The lion advanced slowly into the room.

2. Getting Away

"It's only a small lion," said Norby plaintively. "Just a cub."

"A cub, my foot!" said Jeff, who was clutching Norby and backing toward the kitchen door. "It's almost full-grown and you know it. Where did you get it?"

"In a sort of zoo," said Norby. "It jumped on me and came with me when I went into hyperspace to get home. It wasn't my fault. It followed me."

Admiral Yobo grunted and stood up. Slowly, majestically, he picked up the chair on which he had been sitting and held it in front of him, the legs pointing at the advancing lion. He moved around the table until he was standing in front of Jeff, shielding him.

The lion roared, and Yobo brandished the chair menacingly. The lion snarled and lifted one broad paw.

Norby's hat slammed down until his head had disappeared inside the barrel. His arms and legs sucked inward as well, so that only the metal barrel remained in view.

"Coward," muttered Jeff, but he might have been talking to himself. He was ashamed that he was not defending his own admiral as a space cadet should, instead of vice versa.

The lion's uplifted paw showed its claws as he hit out at the chair leg.

"Get back, you fatuous feline," shouted Yobo, stamping his foot as he pushed the chair forward.

"What zoo?" Jeff asked Norby as the lion began to alternately growl and roar.

"Not a nice one," came the words through the hat. "Very bad."

"I can see that," said Jeff. "The lion looks underfed."

"Cadet!" roared Yobo, louder and deeper than the lion. "Stop practicing the fine art of conversation by making diagnostic comments. Do something. Get into the kitchen and send for help. My ancestors might have battled lions, but not while wearing dress uniforms. I don't plan to get down to hand-to-paw wrestling with this beast. It looks as though it might have fleas."

The lion sprang and Yobo met it with the chair and forced it back. It snarled again and the muscles in its haunches bunched as if it were about to spring again, possibly over the chair.

Jeff put Norby down and ran to the table. The lion, possibly surprised at the sudden movement, stopped snarling at the admiral and turned its menacing yellow eyes on Jeff, who snatched up what was left of the roast chicken and threw it at the lion.

"A dubious accomplishment," said Yobo, as the lion retreated to a

corner and began to devour the chicken, bones and all. "You've bought a little time, at the cost of feeding my dinner to that underfed, oversized cat. Now get to the phone and…"

The door speaker interrupted. "Fargo and Albany are here," it announced.

Since Fargo's thumbprints were keyed to the lock, Jeff didn't have to let him in.

As she entered the apartment, Albany gasped, reached automatically for her gun, and stopped the motion midway. "Drat! No gun," she said turning to Fargo, "Well, you loquacious lout, you're the one who tells me it isn't dainty to wear a gun on a date. You say smooth talk is all one needs. Well, smooth-talk that oversized tomcat."

Fargo's eyes had lit up when he saw the lion. They always did at the sight of danger. But then they fell. "Is that my dinner that lion is eating, after I've saved up an appetite just for the occasion?"

"It's my dinner the lion is eating," said Yobo, still holding the chair in the direction of the animal. "I came here to explain to Jeff that the Inventors Union appears to be planning to confiscate Norby as an alien device possessing great technological secrets, and Norby seems to have retaliated by bringing us a wild pet from a bad zoo."

"Jeff always wanted a kitten," said Fargo, "but this is ridiculous. That lion has finished the chicken and I'm pretty sure he considers it only an appetizer with ourselves as the main course."

The lion gave a cursory lick to its paws, licked its lips on either side with a huge, pink tongue, and then growled. It eyed the four human beings with what seemed to be unsatisfied hunger and aggressive ideas. It rose to its feet and snarled.

Jeff said, "Fargo, do we still have those sedative pills you bought when the family shipping business went bankrupt and you thought you wouldn't sleep well? You never took them, but maybe the lion…"

Fargo lifted his finger. "Good idea. They should still be in the kitchen behind the matchbox we never used till you got a pet robot that plays with kitchen computers."

Jeff kicked Norby. "Stick out your head and legs and go find those pills or I'll tell the admiral to take away your honorary cadethood."

"You wouldn't," said Norby.

"Oh, wouldn't I? Try me-and bring the meatloaf, too."

Norby's appendages and head popped out of his barrel and he ran into the kitchen in the kind of partial antigrav mode that allowed him to take long strides. He came back almost at once with the pills and with the meatloaf in its glass container.

Jeff stuffed the pills into the meatloaf while Yobo made small lunges with the chair legs at the advancing lion, who growled louder. Albany was speaking softly into her wrist phone.

She said, "The Central Park Greater Zoo says it has no room for another lion and it's against the law for us to have one in an apartment in the first place. We could get into a lot of trouble."

"The lion's been telling us that for quite a while," said Yobo, shoving the lion back a step.

"The Bronx Zoo will take one, if we can present a certificate of ownership. I don't suppose Jeff has one," she finished.

"Not lately," said Jeff, swinging the meatloaf.

"But I've called for an antigrav squad car to come up to the windows here."

"Better than nothing," said Jeff, and let go of the meatloaf, which hit the lion in the muzzle.

Fargo said indignantly, "Must I start my vacation by letting you throw the only other dinner we possess to the lions?"

Yobo said, "That doesn't matter. I don't eat red meat. Cadet, did you put the sedative pills into that meatloaf?"

"All of them, Admiral," said Jeff.

"Good. Then it shouldn't be long."

Yobo sat down and began to eat vegetables while the lion finished the meatloaf. "Vegetarianism is good for you," he announced. "Have some."

"Have some what, honored Admiral?" asked Fargo, with exaggerated politeness. "You're eating it all. Besides, I don't believe that the lion will be put to sleep. Those were pretty old pills and I never tested them."

"There's the squad car," said Albany. "Fully automated. Nobody in the precinct was keen on riding with a lion. "

The lion yawned, displaying all of its large, efficient-looking teeth.

Four humans, an automated police car, and a guilty robot waited impatiently for the lion to decide to go to sleep.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," said Norby after awhile. "I suppose it is my fault. I got mixed up."

"That's apparently his specialty, little brother," said Fargo. "When McGillicuddy mixed up his insides, he mixed up Norby." Fargo turned to the robot. "How did you come to think it was a good idea to bring a lion home from the zoo, Norby?"

"It jumped on me, Fargo, and tossed me around as if I were a beach ball! Then it took a grip on me with its paws and I thought that if I went back into hyperspace that would scare it loose, but it didn't. It was too stupid to be scared and it must have held on to me because when I was back in the apartment, it was here, too."

"But where was this zoo, and why did you go there?" asked Fargo.

"It's a long story," said Norby.

The robot turned to Jeff, who came to his defense immediately. "He's too upset to explain clearly, Fargo. It was just some zoo in Europe or somewhere."

"In Europe," said Norby at once. "That's right."

The lion's head sank to its paws. It snored loudly and distracted Fargo, who shook both fists in the air and said, "See? You don't need a gun; just a few pills."

"And someone to think of the pills," grumbled Jeff under his breath.

Yobo had finished the vegetables and began on the large cake Jeff had bought for dessert. "I trust, Cadet, that you will think of a way to get the beast over to the police car, because I do not intend to help lift it. I'm wearing my dress uniform and I'm convinced that animal has fleas."

Albany marched toward the lion with a determined look on her face, but Fargo stopped her. He said, "You have your dress uniform on, too, and that beast must weigh 300 kilograms. It's a man's job. Jeff and I…"

Albany was promptly offended. "What do you mean 'a man's job?' I'm as strong as you are, and Jeff is a boy."

"Jeff may be a boy," Jeff said, "but he believes in thinking out a problem and not just slam-banging into it. That's what Fargo always said I should do. So it's up to Norby."

"I don't want to pick him up," Norby said.

"I don't care whether you want to or not. You just follow orders. Put your arms under that lion and intensify your antigrav and put him into the police car."

"But Jeff, the lion is smelly and it has fleas."

"Fleas aren't going to bother you, and I never heard you complain about smells before."

"It may be sleeping lightly. It may wake up."

"Norby, all this is your fault in the first place, and you're the one who's equipped to deal with the problem. I'm giving you a logical order, and I order you to obey it."

"Oh, very well," said Norby, going to the lion.

"I'll never get used to your robot," said Yobo. "There isn't another one like it in the Federation."

"You mean sassy and rebellious?" asked Fargo.

"I mean intelligent and emotional," said Yobo. There was no smile on his broad, high cheek-boned face. "It's amazing that only the Inventors Union is after him. We should all be. I imagine that if we can find out how he works, everyone will want a Norby instead of the stupid, dutiful machines the Federation allows."

"Nobody would want a mixed-up robot," said Fargo with a shrug.

"I don't know about that," said Albany. "I think he's cute."

Norby winked one of his back eyes at her, wrapped his arms around the lion, and elevated. The lion opened one eye, growled, and began to struggle.

"Hold him!" shouted Jeff, running to help.

"I'm managing," said Norby. "You wanted me to do it myself and I'm going to do it. I'll show you…" He was balancing the sleepily struggling lion on the window sill. "This stupid life form is scratching my barrel. "

"Don't drop him to the sidewalk!" yelled Jeff. "Stupid or not, it is a life form. Put him in the car safely."

"All done," said Norby, stepping back from the window. The door of the police car shut, and Jeff could see the astonished and groggy lion inside.

Albany spoke into her wrist radio and the car flew off. "Okay. The car will take the lion to the Bronx Zoo, where keepers are ready to take it into temporary custody pending determination of ownership."

"Are we going to get fined?" asked Jeff.

"Not likely," said Albany. "They haven't forgotten how we rescued Manhattan from Ing the Ingrate, so it will be easy to fix things up. Besides, the admiral can use his influence."

"No, I won't," said Yobo. "You leave me out of your report. I don't want your Manhattan authorities to know I'm here. My problem is with Norby, not with the lion."

Norby jiggled up and down on his legs. "I'm Jeff's problem, no one else's.

"Unfortunately," said Yobo. "You're everyone's problem. The Inventors Union wants to investigate you scientifically."

"You mean, tear me apart?" squeaked Norby at the highest pitch of his voice range. "Eviscerate my insides? Tangle my circuits? Electrocute my electronics? Spoil my beautiful appearance? I'll disappear and never come back, that's what I'll do."

"No, you won't," said Jeff, "because I'm not going to let anyone do anything to you."

"It's a family matter," said Fargo. "I'm Jeff's guardian and legally responsible for anything he owns. We'll sue…"

"Don't bet on getting the chance," said Yobo, drily. "I think it would make sense to have a serious discussion on how to handle the obvious necessity of doing something about Norby."

"I'm hungry," said Albany, tossing back her long, blond hair.

"Unfortunately," said Fargo, "there's nothing to eat. What the lion didn't devour, the admiral did, so we'll have to go to one of the neighborhood restaurants. If you'll cover up that uniform of yours, Admiral, you can come disguised as an ordinary citizen. If we can get

a shielded booth, we can talk privately there, out of reach of the Inventors Union."

The admiral had no chance to respond because there was a thunderous knocking on the apartment door and a loud call that drowned out any announcement the door computer might have tried to make.

"Open up! Federation security officers!"

Fargo went to the door and leaned nonchalantly against it. "My lady love and I are here and we don't want company. Go away!"

"We have a Federation warrant to confiscate your robot on behalf of the Inventors Union. Open up, or we'll break down the door."

There was another violent knock.

"Go to the bedroom," whispered Yobo to Jeff, "and I suggest you both go on a little trip now…

"Yes, sir," said Jeff. He added quickly, "If I don't get back right away, Fargo, please go on vacation in our scoutship. We can join you because Norby can tune into your ship with his space-location sense."

"Sure I can," said Norby. There was a short pause while Norby's eyes blinked. "I think."

"We'll be sunk if we have to depend on Norby," Fargo said.

Norby squawked incoherently at that, but the admiral pointed imperiously toward the bedroom as the banging on the door grew more forceful.

Jeff and Norby dashed into the bedroom. Norby grabbed Jeff's hand, "Ready?"

Jeff nodded. He was thinking. It's a good thing they don't know Norby's secret that he can vanish into hyperspace without special equipment, or they wouldn't have announced what they were here for.

Just before they disappeared, Jeff and Norby heard Albany say, "Oh, hello, men. Do have this small left-over piece of cake."

The grayness of hyperspace swallowed Jeff and Norby.

3. Jamya

Norby's personal protective field came on automatically to save them from lethal stress of hyperspace, so Jeff was aware only of gray nothingness. And, since time does not exist in hyperspace, he was no sooner aware of it when he was out of it again, with only a vague memory that Norby had been trying to explain-telepathically-how he had got into the bad zoo.

"Where are we?" asked Jeff. They were sitting on a grassy lawn, facing interesting treelike plants that seemed familiar.

"You again!"

The voice was not speaking in Terran Basic, but Jeff understood, and Norby was already answering in the alien language. Nobody had the advantage of having eyes in the back of his head (except there wasn't any real back to his head; all sides were front).

Jeff turned around. In the other direction was a landscaped hill with a large castlelike structure on it. At the foot of the hill, quite near to Jeff, was a miniature castle with a female dragon standing in the doorway. She was green, her large eyes fringed by eyelashes, and she held a smaller version of herself. Both wore thin gold collars.

Jeff said softly, "You've brought us back to Jamya, Norby. I thought you didn't know how to get here."

"I don't," Norby answered in a low voice. "It's some instinct or something. I just came. Part of me knows the planet of the dragons."

"Well, then, please don't insult the Jamyns this time." He rose and bowed politely. "How do you do, ma'am? And how is your pretty daughter, Zargl, whom I see in your arms?"

"I'm fine," said the young dragon, as she spread her wings and flew to Jeff's shoulder. "I'm glad you came back. You didn't stay long last time. I'm also glad you've learned our language."

Jeff hoped his smile would seem a pleasant expression to the dragons. A gentle dragon bite had established telepathic communication with him when he and Norby had come here once before, and the bite had made it possible for him to learn the Jamyn language telepathically, almost at once. Perhaps the dragons could learn Terran Basic through telepathy.

"I detect your thought," said the mother dragon in Terran Basic. "If you speak your language carefully and think more clearly, then I will learn more quickly." She switched to Jamyn. "It is more important, however, for you to continue to improve your knowledge of our language, which is clearly the more civilized of the two."

Jeff did not think it would be wise to dispute that. He said, "Yes, ma'am," in careful Jamyn.

"I discussed your earlier arrival with the Grand Dragon, and she said you must know the secret of hyperspace travel, which we Jamyn have never been given. We were meant to stay on our own planet."

"Do you have many visitors?" Jeff asked.

"We have had none at all. You were the first. That's why the matter had to be discussed. It was decided that if visitors are approved by the Mentors, they will be permitted to stay for a short period. Do you intend to remain?"

"Do we intend to remain, Norby?" asked Jeff.

"Not exactly." Norby blinked several times in that exasperating way he had when he was debating whether or not to confess that he'd gotten mixed up again. "Part of me seems to want to be here, and knows the way even though the rest of me doesn't. And I do know the language. I just can't quite remember what a Mentor is."

"In Terran Basic, it means 'wise teacher,'" said Jeff.

"It means the same in Jamyn," said the mother dragon. "They are our teachers. We were once a wild and primitive species, but the Others came and left Mentors to help us, as our legends say; and, of course, our legends are inspired and therefore true. By the way, you mustn't think of me as mother dragon. That is quite belittling. My name is Ziphyzggtmtizm."

Jeff knew only so much could be expected of telepathic learning. "May I call you Zi?" he asked.

Ziphyzggtmtizm whispered it several times softly to herself, then said, "Yes. I like it."

"Who are the Others?"

"That is difficult to say. There are no descriptions of them in our legends, and the Mentors have never told us anything about them… Zargl! Stop clawing at the alien's top scales! Mind your manners! Besides all that long, soft tangle may not be clean."

Zargl took her claws out of Jeff's hair and said, "What's your name, alien?"

"I'm Jeff and this is my robot, Norby."

"Odd," said Zi. "Robots are small devices for mechanical labor, controlled by household computers, and are without personality or intelligence. Naturally, they belong to thinking Jamyns, as any machine might. This Norby that you call a robot, however, seems to have personality and intelligence. How can he be owned?"

"That is a good question, come to think of it," said Norby.

"Norby and I are partners," Jeff said before Norby could work over the question.

The baby dragon left Jeff's shoulder and flew down to perch on Norby's hat.

"Get off, get off," shouted Norby, waving his arms. "Won't," said

Zargl. "You're not a Mentor."

"I am, too," said Norby. "I am a teacher. I've been teaching that human boy languages, history, and-uh-galactic travel."

Jeff sighed. Could you call it galactic travel when you were never sure where you were going, or how you would get away, or if you would return home when you did get away?

"Would you care to have something to eat in my house?" asked Zi, courteously. "It was rude of me to chase you away last time and I would like to make amends. The Mentors know you are here by now, but they may not get round to you for a while because, as far as we know, they spend most of their time meditating. They are trying to tune in to all parts of the universe so they can find the Others. We will have time to eat."

"I'm not sure I can eat your food," said Jeff, trying to sound apologetic so as not to give offense.

"I'll test it first," said Norby.

"You being so accurate?"

"Yes, indeed," said Norby, extending his legs to their longest and putting his hands on the sides of his barrel. "Testing the structure of foodstuffs is absurdly simple for a genius robot like me." Norby stalked into the dragon's home and Jeff followed.

Norby passed the food as safe. "Good protein," he said. "High in fiber, lower in cholesterol. It will do you good, Jeff."

Except for something blue and mushy that he decided not to try, Jeff thought it was delicious.

The dragons' furniture was another thing. It was not built for human dimensions and angles and almost nothing looked the least bit comfortable. The exception was something in one corner that looked like a battered old green hassock.

"May I sit on this, Zi?" Jeff asked.

"Certainly. It's an antique tail rest that has been in our family for generations. It's still quite useful. Of course, you don't have a tail, you poor thing, but you are certainly welcome to rest the place where the tail ought to be."

Jeff sat down and found it comfortable enough. It had a small design on top that resembled a diamond-shaped figure on the dragons' collars. A more interesting design of complicated wiggly patterns circled the sides of the hassock.

Jeff said, "Where is your husband, Zi?"

"What is a husband?"

"Well, the male of the species who-that is…"

"Male? Oh, you mean a different variety of a life form? I've read that such a phenomenon occurs on other planets. We don't travel, as I told you, but the Mentors have provided us with good

galactographies. When I read about the peculiar customs and habits of other worlds I can only be grateful that we Jamyns live on a civilized planet."

"But if you don't have males, how do you have children?"

"Ah-you need males for that on other worlds, don't you? I've never really understood that. We bud, you know, and I don't see how it can be done conveniently any other way. Zargl was such a cute bud, right here under my wing. You should have seen her. But actually," she brought one wing forward and covered her eyes with it briefly, "we don't really talk about budding among ourselves. It's private. You're not Jamyn, of course, so you don't matter."

"But if you bud," said Jeff, a little argumentatively, "there's very little alteration of inherited characteristics, and you can't evolve. In our species, the genes always get mixed up so that children aren't exactly like their parents and we evolve quickly."

"See," whispered Norby to Jeff, "it's good to be mixed up." Jeff glared at him, and Norby closed his eyes and pretended he hadn't said anything.

"According to our traditions, the Others helped us to stay the same. I suppose, since the universe itself is changing, that there should be creatures that change. I wish you and your species well, for while we Jamyn contribute stability, perhaps you Terrans contribute exciting change."

"Exciting, indeed," said Norby, bouncing up and down slightly. "You have no idea how mixed-up all the Terran life forms are"-he glanced quickly at Jeff as he emphasized the word-"especially human beings. Their history has all the excitement of nasty wars and wicked persecutions and foolish plots and..,."

"Norby! How can you say such things about your own world?" Jeff asked. "You're just ashamed of being mixed up yourself."

"I told you I couldn't help the lion. I explained it all to you while we were in hyperspace and you're not helping me in the least with my new secret. It scares me."

What new secret? thought Jeff. He tried to remember and failed.

Just then the dragons' computer made a chiming noise.

"Oh," said Zi. "What an honor! It's a direct signal from the Mentors' castle. I've never been worthy of a direct signal before. How my friends will envy me." She spread out both her wings as far as they would go and bowed deeply in the direction of the chime.

The computer said, "The aliens are summoned for an audience. Only the aliens. They must come at once, and alone."

Norby ran over to Jeff, his hat so low that you could barely see his eyes. "I don't want to go. I'm afraid."

"Why? You think part of you may be from here, don't you? Jamya

may be where your alien portions were formed."

"I don't care. Let's go back to Earth and find Fargo…Or maybe we could disguise ourselves and join a circus traveling through the solar system."

"The Inventors Union will find us if we do," said Jeff. "Do you want to be taken apart?"

Suddenly the dragons' computer screen swirled with an eerie color. When it cleared, a cold light shone on a monstrous shape standing in a cavernous space on two thick lower limbs. The figure had four arms, a head that bulged on top, with a slit below the bulge that could have been a mouth, and three iridescent patches on the bulge that could have been eyes.

"Mama! I'm scared!" wailed Zargl, leaping into her mother's arms and folding her wings.

Jeff realized, a bit uneasily, that he felt the same way. And yet he was larger than Zi and, for all he knew, he might be larger than the creature on the computer screen. He flexed his arm muscles to reassure himself that he still had them, and wished he knew as much about karate as Albany Jones did. He grabbed Norby and stood up straight.

"Ouch!" Jeff had forgotten that the dragons' ceiling was low, and, in the process of rubbing his sore head and trying to stoop, he dropped Norby, who fell with a clunk.

"Ouch!" Norby said. "You keep dropping me, Jeff! What kind of an owner are you?"

"Why don't you turn on your antigrav when you feel yourself falling? You would if you weren't so busy retracting." Looking around for allies, Jeff saw with discouragement that Norby was not completely withdrawn into his barrel and muttering ominously. Zargl was cowering in Zi's arms, and Zi had backed as far from her own computer screen as possible.

Zi said with clear embarrassment, "Of course, there's nothing to be afraid of, but I never saw a Mentor before. We only receive verbal messages and there are no pictures of them in our books. This is most unusual…and a gr-reat honor, I think."

"But Zi," said Jeff, "how can you be afraid? We humans have always imagined dragons to be completely brave. It was dragons who terrified others. Dragons could even breathe fire."

"Oh, we can do that." said Zi, not taking her eyes off the apparition on the screen. She breathed out a small blue flame. "That's one of our old, primitive defenses, but it takes a lot of energy to separate the hydrogen from the…"

Jeff had backed away from her. "There! You see! Even though you're small, you shouldn't be afraid."

Zi said, indignantly, "I am not small! Only the Grand Dragonship is larger than I am, and she's my aunt. And I'm not afraid of the Mentor-if that's a Mentor. I'm just overcome by respect and awe."

But she acted afraid.

Jeff shrugged and turned back to the screen. The strange figure was staring at them, if those patches of shimmering color were indeed eyes.

"What do you want?" Jeff demanded, determined that he wasn't going to show fear, whatever the others did.

"Courtesy and respect," said the figure in a kind of creaky voice, as though it were something that was not often used. "I've summoned you to the presence, and you have not hurried. See to it that you come immediately to the Mentor castle on the hill. Alone!" The screen went blank.

Norby's head popped up. "Not without me."

"I thought you were too scared," Jeff said.

"I am, but I'm less scared when I'm with you. Besides, if we're together we can both escape through hyperspace. If we were separated," he added virtuously, "I wouldn't dream of escaping on my own and leaving you in danger here."

"We'll think about escape later," Jeff said, "after we find out what the Mentors want. Come on, partner!"

4. Mentors And Hassocks

Jeff wanted to pretend that Norby didn't have antigrav but this had disadvantages. The path up the hill to the large castle was steep, and the paving was ravaged by age. It was rough and uneven, and rank weeds grew in the cracks.

Jeff sighed inwardly at the discomforts of their progress, while Norby, walking on his two-way feet, complained loudly and repetitiously until Jeff finally decided that carrying him was easier than listening to his grumbling.

Halfway up, Jeff was forced to say, "You're no pleasure to carry uphill full weight, Norby, so could I persuade you to turn on your antigrav a little?"

Norby complied with his usual mixed-up judgment of intensity, so that Jeff had to shout, "Not that much," as his feet began to leave the ground. "You'll reveal the ability."

Norby added a bit of weight and they continued to climb.

It soon became quite apparent that the paving was not the only imperfection. What had appeared to be lovely landscaping turned out to be full of flaws, although here and there it seemed as if someone had tried, halfheartedly, to prune trees and weed flower beds.

"The Mentors don't seem to care how things look," said Jeff.

"What's that?" Norby asked, jiggling so much that Jeff lost his balance and let go of him. Whit his own full weight suddenly restored, Jeff sat down hard. Fortunately, he sat on a patch of weeds growing where a paving stone should have been.

Norby came down much more gently. "You keep letting go of me. What's the matter with you?"

"Why were you jiggling? What 's the matter with you?" Jeff got up and rubbed himself where he had made contact with the ground.

"I was looking at that. It startled me. "

Among the flowers off to the side was an odd little metal creature, much smaller than Norby. It had a long arm with pincers at one end, another arm ending in a scoop, and yet another that looked like coiled wire. Underneath were lots of little legs, and the whole thing slightly resembled a Terran crab.

The creature uncoiled its wire, touched Jeff with it, and immediately backed off, waving its other arms furiously.

"We aren't going to hurt anything," said Jeff.

The creature made no sound but turned away and began to weed the garden.

"I think it's just a gardening robot," Jeff said. "It looks very old-all dented and discolored. No wonder the castle grounds aren't in good

shape."

"It's not intelligent," Norby said and sailed into Jeff's arms again. "It was nothing for you to be afraid of."

"I'm not the one who…" began Jeff, and then gave it up as a bad job.

They climbed on to the castle until its gigantic metallic door loomed ahead of them. It had hinges, but no doorknob.

"Do we knock?" asked Jeff, "I don't see signs of a computer scan."

"You might not recognize one on this planet," Norby said.

"Well, do you?"

"No," said Norby. "I keep feeling I know this place, but the memory is so faint, it doesn't seem to help me. The diamond design on the door seems familiar."

"That's because it's also on the dragons' collars and on the top of their hassock. Didn't you notice?"

"Come to think of it, I did."

"I'll bet. But now that you do, what does it mean?"

Norby paused. Then he said in a hurt tone, "I wish I weren't so mixed up with Terran parts. If all of me were alien, or Jamyn, I'd probably understand everything."

"I doubt that, somehow, but try to think. Does the design tell us what to do, or is it just the mark of the Others?"

"That's it," Norby cried out triumphantly. "It just came to me like a flash. It's the mark of the Others. Now why didn't you think of that? That's how the Others marked their special property. And if you use the right computer technique, the diamond plus that squiggly border design around the door…"

"It was around the hassock, too," said Jeff.

"I'm glad you noticed," said Norby. "Well, the diamond plus the squiggly border design tells you how…"

"Tells us how to what?"

"I'm sorry, Jeff, but that's the part I can't remember."

And just as Jeff was going to express his opinion of that, the massive door began to creak slowly open. Jeff could see nothing inside but a long, dark hallway.

"Well, let's go in, Norby."

Norby took a step backward. "Do we have to?"

"Certainly. That's what we came for." Jeff strode boldly through the door and down the hall, looking for an opening into a room. Norby ran behind him, mumbling.

"What are you talking about?" asked Jeff.

"I'm not talking. At least, not words. I'm going over equations that keep popping into my head. I think the squiggly design is a set of mathematical relationships. I've got to figure it out. I want to

understand myself so I don't keep getting into trouble, like landing in the Coliseum by mistake."

"The old building on Columbus Circle in Manhattan? Why " did you land there?"

"No! The one in Rome," said Norby impatiently. I told you all about it in hyperspace. "

There didn't seem to be any doors, and the corridor began to wind.

"I couldn't understand you in hyperspace. When were you in Rome?"

"When I got the lion. Don't you remember the lion? It was all very unpleasant in the Coliseum. People were fighting in armor and other people were being eaten by lions. Then guards picked me up because I was in the way and threw me into the lion's cage…"

"Norby! Was the Coliseum-intact?"

"Sure. Not at all like the ruin in the pictures of Rome."

Jeff stopped short before another sharp curve in the corridor. "Are you telling me the truth, Norby? We were studying Roman history and you were working with Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. So when you left…Norby! You couldn't have."

Norby said, "Well, where did the lion come from? I was thinking how nice it would be to see old Julius himself, and maybe I didn't quite make it and was a century short-a century later in time than Julius-with Christians being thrown to the lions, and one of the lions came with me."

Jeff, feeling stunned, said "That means you actually traveled through time; but scientists say that's impossible."

"Well, I did it anyway. I just don't know how."

"You don't know how you do anything."

"I'm sorry," said Norby. "I guess time travel is my other secret."

"Can you go back into time again?"

"I don't know."

Jeff shook his head. He walked around the bend in the hall and saw an archway leading to a vast auditorium. High, thin slivers of windows shed a feeble light into the murkiness. In the shadows were formidable figures like the one they had seen on the computer screen, all standing very still.

"The Mentors," said Jeff.

"Hundreds of them," agreed Norby, "but they're inactivated.".

"Inacti…do you mean they are robots? Dead robots?"

"I can always tell a robot…almost always."

Jeff walked into the enormous room, moving from one figure to another. They were all about a meter taller than he, each with the bulge on its head and the slit and three patches. There was no color or

light in the patches. Their black, metallic surfaces were discolored and, in some places, cracked. They certainly seemed inactive-and very old.

Norby sidled in ahead of Jeff and began rapping the Mentors, surfaces with his knuckles, now that he was sure they weren't alive. He stopped so suddenly that Jeff almost tripped over him.

"Something's alive in here," whispered Norby. "One of them is still alive. And the building-it's alive, too. There's a big computer inside the walls. I should have tuned in to it before. I think it's time to go home, Jeff."

Jeff squared his shoulders and looked around, but he saw nothing moving in the shadows.

"What do you want?" he called out loudly. "You sent for us. What do you want?" c

There was no answer, but Jeff became conscious of a faint vibration in the soles of his feet. Norby was right-the building was alive. Had the castle itself sent for him?

"What do you want of me?" he called again.

"Jeff!" yelled Norby. "Help!" Four scurrying little machines, similar to the gardener robot outside, plunged out of the darkness and hurtled toward Norby. They grabbed and held him by his arms and legs.

As Jeff started toward Norby, one of the large Mentor robots suddenly moved. Its eyepatches began to gleam with an iridescence that was like shining quivering worms. Its four arms rose.

"Jeff-don't let it near you!" Norby cried out as he struggled to shake off the little machines.

It was too late. The robot's arms extended and caught Jeff in a tight grip he could not break.

"Norby," Jeff yelled, "go into hyperspace. Try to leave the machines behind, but take them with you if you have to."

"What about you, Jeff?"

"I'll be all right-until you get back. I know you'll remember how to get back," said Jeff, not at all sure that Norby would.

Norby pulled in his head, and with the small attack robots hanging onto his arms and legs, disappeared.

"Good riddance!" The big robot that was holding Jeff spoke now in a coarse grinding voice. He spoke in Jamyn. "I do not approve of alien machines. Or alien life forms, either."

"Now wait," said Jeff, trying vainly to twist an arm out of the robotic grip. "I'm here on a friendly visit."

"If you are friendly, prove it by staying and performing a task for us."

As he spoke, the Mentor lifted Jeff and carried him to the back of

the room, where he pressed a depression in the wall with one of his feet. The wall split in two and slid aside, revealing machinery that glittered and flickered with shifting lights, although nothing else moved. In the center of the machinery, there was a space big enough for ten human beings to stand upright. The Mentor placed Jeff in the space and stood back.

Jeff tried to leave, but found himself encased in walls of force that he could not see but that stung him badly when he touched them. He sat down in the center and waited.

The lights around him began to turn and focus, as if they were concentrating on him.

I'm being scanned, he thought.

— Yes, you are, a telepathic voice replied-Think slowly and clearly so that the scanning of your thoughts will be done correctly.

"No, I won't," said Jeff, aloud. "I'm not going to let you find out where I come from."

— You will stay here until everything is found out and you have completed your task.

"I'm not a machine." Jeff was shouting now, trying to let feelings of indignation drown out his thoughts. "I'm protoplasmic. Organic. I need food. What about that?"

— The Jamyn will provide. Now stop talking so that your mind can be explored, or you will be punished.

"I won't stop. Ow!" He'd been given a rather unpleasant electric shock.

He stopped talking and began to think furiously, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears…"

— Where is your planet?

— Never heard of it. 'I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.' Ow! If you give me more electric shocks, I'll fall unconscious and you'll have only mixed-up gibberish in my thoughts to read instead of good Shakespeare.

— Why are you here? What do you call yourself these days?

— The best species in the universe, that's what we call ourselves. And what do you mean these days? 'To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer '

It went on for some time. Fortunately. for Jeff, there was no need to get the Shakespearian speeches word-perfect, or even to think of different ones. After a while, he just kept repeating 'To be or not to be' over and over again. He had two more electric shocks, but after the second, he pretended to stagger and began to think nonsense syllables with all his might. After that there were no more shocks. Outside the walls of force, the figure of the Mentor seemed still, as if it had run down.

And then there was another telepathic voice in his mind.

— Jeff! I'll get you out of here.

Jeff saw Norby beside him, inside the scanner. -Norby! I thought you weren't coming back from hyperspace after all.

— After I refueled I left my attackers in hyperspace and hyperjumped into your prison. I'm going to try to get us out of here and into the dragon's house.

— No! Take us home!

— What if the Mentors' computer can detect where I head for?

— That's smart, Norby! I should have thought of that. But why Zi's house?

— Because I've decided we want her hassock. I don't know what it is, but it's from the Others, and I think it's supposed to be opened. I'm sure Zi doesn't know that.

But the Mentor did. Its thoughts suddenly seemed to thunder out, overriding those of Norby.

— It is I who must have that hassock. I see a picture of it in your mind.

"Hurry," said Jeff, aloud, taking Norby's hand. "Hyperjump!"

It was as if they only dipped in and out of the grayness and there was Zi's little castle ahead.

"Tiddledewinks," said Norby. "I meant to land in her living room. - and here come more of the Mentors' attack force, he added, pointing to the small crablike machines which could be seen as little dots beginning to scurry down the hill from the castle. Jeff and Norby ran.

Zi came out to meet them, along with Zargl who began to squeal with delight at seeing Jeff again. "What is it?" Zi asked. "How are the Mentors? How important you must be to be granted audience by them."

"Later," said Jeff. "May we have your hassock? I mean the thing you rest your tail on. It may be a device from the Others."

"Then please take it. I am afraid to own such things. Do come again for dinner." She stepped into her little castle, and then emerged with the hassock, which she handed to Jeff.

Jeff held the hassock to his chest. It was smaller than Norby, and much lighter in weight. The cover, which felt like leather, was a faded green, much scuffed by years of having scaly dragon tails rubbing about on it.

Norby said, "I'm sure, somehow, that this hassock opens up if you figure out the mental key encoded in the squiggles around its sides. Something's inside."

"What?"

"I don't know. But don't keep talking, Jeff. Those little attack robots are almost down the hill. "

Norby activated his antigrav and sailed under Jeff's other arm, the one that wasn't holding the hassock. "Ready?" he asked.

The oncoming crablike robots scurried faster.:'Put down what you are holding and surrender yourselves. You are our prisoners," they cried out in chorus, their squeaky voices painfully shrill.

"No," said Jeff. "You have a nice planet but you don't know how to make visitors feel at home. Now, good-bye."

"Wait, don't go," they all squeaked.

Jeff said, "Straight back to our apartment, Norby. The security police will be gone by now. Make sure your protective shield reaches around the hassock while we're in hyperspace, and don't think about our home coordinates very hard. I don't want the Mentor to know."

"Don't worry," said Norby. "I don't think he's strong enough to use telepathy without the help of his main computer, or without touching us."

The attack robots were almost upon them. "Let's go, Norby!"

The grayness came and went-and they were falling. "Norby," shouted Jeff, "turn on your antigrav before we hit!"

They zoomed upward and Jeff, trembling a little, looked down. He was still holding the hassock under his left arm, and Norby under his right, and they were no longer on Jamya. That was clear.

But they weren't in the Wells' apartment either. There was no apartment, no building, no Manhattan. Only a vast whiteness stretched below them.

"Snow?" said Norby. "It's summer. What's snow doing here?"

"That's not just snow," Jeff said. "That's a glacier."

5. Time And Other Troubles

"You've brought us to Alaska!" Jeff was shivering. "Or some such place far north! Or someplace far south, like Antarctica. Or maybe even to some other planet."

"This is Earth. I'm certain of it," Norby said as they skimmed above the ice. "The coordinates check, and I'm sure that's Earth's sun. I guess it's Antarctica."

"No, it isn't," Jeff said. "If that's Earth's sun, it's quite high in the sky, so it can't be Antarctica. Or Alaska, either. I'd say it was the Tibetan plateau, except we'd be able to see mountains, and we don't."

"Don't get all excited, Jeff. Here come some horses, and maybe we can ask the riders…"

Jeff squinted in the direction Norby was pointing. "There aren't any riders, and those are camels. Big, shaggy camels, and they're walking over snow! Uh, oh!"

Norby's pair of eyes facing Jeff closed suddenly and then popped open "You think…"

"Yes, I think! Which you don't." Jeff studied the circle of the horizon. What had seemed to be solid whiteness resolved itself into a slope, and in the south-if it was south-there was a valley with stunted pine trees beginning where the glacier ended. The valley went on and on, deeper and deeper, and way out was the Atlantic. Or was it the Pacific?

"Norby! There's another herd of animals over there by those pine trees. Take us closer!"

It was worse than Jeff had imagined. "Do you know what those animals are?" he demanded.

"Elephants," quavered Norby, "and they shouldn't be up in the snow country, should they?"

"It's worse than elephants. Those elephants are extinct elephants."

"But they're alive."

"They're alive now, but they're going to be extinct some day. Look at them, Norby! Elephants don't have long blond hair. They're mastodons, and we're seeing them with our own eyes, which no one else of our generation has ever done."

"Maybe they're woolly mammoths. Aren't woolly mammoths supposed to live in cold climates?"

"Not any more. Not since the last Ice Age-which is where you've taken us to."

"I'm sorry, Jeff. I really am. I was thinking so much about time travel that I automatically did it when I was just trying to get us home."

"You said you didn't know how."

"I don't, but something inside me…"

"Oh, never mind," Jeff said. "Anyway, mammoths had large round bulges on top of their heads and mastodons didn't. Mastodon bones were found up the Hudson River Valley in the eighteenth century."

Jeff paused. Then he said thoughtfully, "Well, then, this is the Hudson River Valley, or what will become the Hudson River Valley once the glacier retreats. Over there is the prehistoric Hudson canyon with a river carrying melted glacier water to the sea, and it will be covered by ocean in our own time. This could even be before the Indians entered the Americas. Norby, you've got to take us to our own century." The hassock was getting awkward to hold in the cold, and Jeff tried to balance it on his hip. He wished he could put his hands in his pockets because it was so cold.

"Jeff," Norby said, "I'm too scared to try. I muddle things. Maybe we should just stay here."

"In this Ice Age? We'll surely freeze to death. And if we go south to where it's warm, we'll still have nothing to eat, no weapons for catching game, and nobody to talk to but each other. Besides, I want to be back in my own time."

"But I don't know how to get back!"

"You got back from the Roman Coliseum."

"Well, when the lion jumped on me, I got so scared that I stopped thinking. I just time jumped."

"Then do it again now."

"I can't stop thinking."

It's my responsibility, thought Jeff. Norby is just a mixed-up little robot with talents he doesn't understand or know how to use very well. It's no use blaming him or trying to make him solve the problem. I've got to do it. Fargo always says "Don't think a lot, little brother, just think smart, and when you decide to act, do it with all your heart:' He was still having trouble with the awkwardly shaped hassock. He couldn't get a comfortable grip on it with his chilled fingers. -How do I think smart? he wondered.

— I don't understand you, Norby interjected. Then he remembered. Ever since the dragon bite, he and Norby had been able to telepathize when they were in contact and thinking hard. He said, "I was just trying to think, Norby, and you're reading my mind."

"I wish you could read my mind and tell me how to get back to our own time. I can do it, but I can't seem to make myself. Maybe it isn't part of either the alien me or the Terran me, but from the two being mixed together."

There was silence for a while, during which Jeff could feel himself shivering and hear his teeth chattering. Finally he said" All I

can hear in your mind is 'Oh, my, Jeff will sell me if I keep being so mixed up.' Now, just stop that, because I'm not going to sell you. You're my robot forever, mixed up or not."

"Thank you, Jeff," said Norby. "And all I can hear in your brain is 'I'm so cold. I'm so cold.' I feel terrible about that, Jeff."

"Well," said Jeff miserably, "at least it's summer here, or the sun wouldn't be so high in the sky, and it's a clear afternoon, with no wind blowing. It's cold enough, but it could be lots colder another day or another season. Let's try together, Norby. I'll think hard about our apartment. You tune into that image in my head and then perhaps you'll find the time coordinates maybe by reflex."

They tried and failed.

"It doesn't work!" Norby wailed.

Jeff bit his lip and tried not to feel despair. There had to be some way out. "Norby," he said, "maybe we're not trying hard enough because we don't really want to go back to the apartment, and it might not be safe. If we could go to our family scoutship, the Hopeful, that might make more sense, only…"

"Only what?"

"Well, I'm not sure where it is. It could be at the big dock that orbits Mars along with Space Command-now that Fargo is part of Admiral Yobo's team. but there are thousands of berths there, and I don't know which one would be Hopeful's. In fact, I can't be absolutely sure the scoutship is even there."

"We can try," said Norby. "Try to visualize the Space Command dock. You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I can't visualize the Hopeful there." Jeff clumsily managed to shift the hassock under his arm to a new position and tried to grip it comfortably. "I can imagine the control room of the Hopeful clearly, however. Maybe we can tune into it regardless of where she is." He winced with pain. "I'm so cold that the arm holding this hassock hurts. My muscles are cramping.".

At that very moment, the hassock fell out of Jeff's numbed arm and tumbled over and over in the air-down, down to the snow.

"Oh, no," he shouted, and beat his arm against his chest to get circulation back into it. He didn't have a chance to make much noise or do much beating because the wind was knocked out of him by the force of Norby's dive.

Zoom! Norby plunged through the cold air, holding onto Jeff, and he managed to get under the hassock. He caught it just before it hit the ground. In the process, however, he let go of Jeff.

Fortunately, Norby was just starting his upswing again so that Jeff fell without the added velocity of the dive-and the top layer of the snow was soft. He landed spread eagle on his back and was half-

buried. He struggled clumsily to his feet.

Contritely, Norby swept down again,. holding the hassock in one arm, while the other arm stretched out to take Jeff's hand.

Up in the air again, Jeff writhed in his efforts to knock off the snow that clung to him.

"Hold still," said Norby.

"I can't. If the snow stays on me it will melt from what little body heat I have and I'll get wet. And one thing that's much worse than being this cold is being this cold and wet, too."

"Think about the control room."

Jeff tried. Fargo had taught him concentration and meditation techniques years ago, and now he needed them to save his life.

— The Hopeful. Small. Neat. Useful.

— Don't think in words, Jeff. Just pictures.

The pictures came and slowly Jeff immersed himself in them, relaxing and trusting Norby to hang on to him, and to the hassock, too, and at the same time to keep them in air with his antigrav.

As Jeff relaxed, the pictures came more vividly until he forgot he was cold and cramped and desperate-or even that he was himself. He was he-and-Norby, looking at the control room of the Hopeful seeing it clearly in their joined minds, so clearly that it was real, located in space and time.

And suddenly they were there!

"Oh!" said Albany, who was much too cool a policewoman to scream.

Jeff smiled at them weakly and shivered uncontrollably as he brushed at his hair to remove the melting snow.

"It was all ice," Norby shouted. "Jeff nearly froze. It was all my fault, but I couldn't help it."

Fargo waved him to be quiet and had his hands on Jeff quickly. "Explain later. Get those clothes off."

"But Albany…" protested Jeff.

Albany turned around. "I won't look," she said.

"Get them off, I say," Fargo said. "It doesn't matter whether she looks or not. And get me a blanket, Norby." In a few minutes, Jeff relaxed in the warmth of the blanket while Fargo rubbed a towel vigorously over his head and face. "Now tell me," Fargo said, "Where were you?"

"On a trip," Norby put in brightly.

"With a hassock?" asked Albany.

"Listen!" Jeff interrupted. "Is it safe here? No security police?"

"Just our own devoted Manhattan police," Fargo said, putting his arm about Albany's trim waist, "whom I was trying to persuade to go off on a little search expedition with me. She says she can't because a

fiscal crisis in Manhattan has forced the lay-off of so many police that she dare not stay off the job for any length of time. Did you ever hear anything so crazy?"

"You mean we're still in Manhattan?" Jeff asked. "I thought the ship would be at the Space Command dock."

"It was, earlier, but after you left our apartment, I let the security police search it. Naturally, they found nothing and left, breathing fire and slaughter. Then I sat around and waited for you. But days passed, and you didn't come back, so I decided I'd look for you in the ship. But I brought it back to Earth first because I wanted Albany along. After all, she's a good person in a fray, and at other times, too."

"What do you mean 'the days passed'?" demanded Jeff. "How long do you think I've been gone?"

"I don't think, Jeff, I know. You've been gone thirteen days."

"What!"

"Why be surprised? Don't you know how long you've been gone?"

Jeff shook his head. "I guess I'm going to have to tell you Norby's other secret."

"Are you going to tell it while a non-family person is in our midst?" said Norby sounding outraged. His head popped in and out of his barrel.

Albany smiled-as beautifully as she did everything. "That's all right. Since I can't go with you on this trip, I had better not hear any secrets just yet. And now I must go back to my precinct."

She headed for the airlock.

"Do you mean we're in Manhattan?" asked Jeff again.

"On the Great Lawn of Central Park," said Fargo, "which isn't quite according to regulations for a craft of this kind, but I have an official paper from Admiral Yobo, and a police officer I know pulled a few strings," he smiled at Albany, "so here I am."

He went to the airlock and looked back at Jeff. "While I'm escorting my exasperating lass-who would rather be on her job than with me because of her civic spirit-why don't you have a cup of hot chocolate? You might as well get warm inside as well as out. And eat something if you're hungry."

Fargo and Albany went out.

Jeff said to Norby, "I hope you realize you got us back nearly two weeks late."

Norby said, "You really expect everything, don't you? Didn't I get you back right on the button-right in the control room? So I was a few minutes off."

"A few minutes…"

Fargo came back into the Hopeful in a hurry. He sealed the lock behind him. "Prepare for takeoff, mates. The security police have

discovered that my ship is in Central Park and they want to search it. We either leave now while Albany tries to hold them off, or you two will have to disappear again."

"Where shall I take you, Jeff?" Norby asked cheerfully.

"Not again," Jeff said. "Take off, Fargo. I'll stay in the Hopeful. I can't stand the thought of getting lost in time and space again."

Fargo's eyebrows shot upward, but he said nothing as he handled the controls. The Hopeful lifted.

The computer outlet spoke. "Security police in antigrav car outside, Captain. You are under arrest and ordered to surrender your ship. If you try to leave, you will be brought back by force grapple."

"So they say," said Fargo, "but they'll have to catch us first."

"But they will," said Jeff.

"No, they won't. I will lose them in the cloud layer, and while they're looking for us, we'll get into hyperspace if Norby can manage it. We'll go in and never come out, so far as they are concerned."

"Then they'll know we have hyperdrive."

"No, they won't. They'll only know we've disappeared, and presumably crashed. They'll spend days looking for the smashed torso of our scoutship." Fargo turned to Norby. "Can you turn this ship's engine to hyperdrive as soon as we're into the cloud?" he asked.

"I can channel my hyperspace entry system into the ship's computer. She's a stupid computer but maybe she'll be able to follow my instructions. If she were as intelligent as I am…"

"Just do it, Norby," Fargo said.

Jeff, at the thought of facing another jaunt through hyperspace, buried his head in his hands.

6. Opening The Hassock

"That was a piece of cake," Fargo said.

"Thank you," Norby said, ' 'but you can say that because you're not the one who had to do it. I had to work myself to death to get that stupid computer to do the right thing. Are you all right, Jeff?"

Jeff peered out from his blanket. "Well, I am tired," he said, "and hungry, too. Do you mind if I'm tired and hungry? Is there a law against that?"

"That's just like a boy," said Norby. "Always tired and hungry, and always getting short-tempered about it."

Fargo turned around in his captain's chair and fiddled with the computer. "A meal will be served shortly, Jeff, but it will be food and water in the brig if you don't tell me what's happened to you, and what Norby's other secret is; although after you talked about being lost in space and time, I guess I can guess the latter. "

"We don't have a brig," Jeff grumbled, "and first I want to eat." He watched the glass door where the food would make its appearance. He didn't care what kind of synthomeal the Hopeful would manage to provide, so long as she did it quickly.

With a slight sound like a burp, the Hopeful served up synthoburger, synthofries, and real, if reconstituted, applesauce.

Fargo's blue eyes were amused as Jeff dove into the food, "I see I'll have to wait a long time to hear the story."

Through a mouthful of fries, Jeff said thickly, "Get it from Norby-not that you'll get an unbiased story."

"He's communing with the ship's computer."

"And I can't be interrupted right now," Norby said importantly. "I'm making some very delicate adjustments on the computer so that maybe you'll be able to put the ship into hyperdrive even if I'm not with you. I've altered the antigrav engine slightly to fit, because you can't get into hyperspace unless your hyperdrive is based on antigrav."

"How do you know?"

"It's just a feeling I have. This universe is all tied up with gravity, and I don't think you can get out of normal space unless you get rid of gravity for a while. Or it could be vice-versa. Maybe antigrav works by tying ordinary space to a little hyperspace."

"Where are we now?" Jeff asked some minutes later, his mouth still full of food.

"I don't know," said Fargo…"Norby! Unplug yourself and tell us where you've brought us. That's a pretty planet out there, but it sure isn't Earth."

"Jamya," mumbled Norby.

"Oh, no! Not again!" Jeff suspended his labors over the applesauce and said, "Fargo, you'd better have the whole story."

Fargo listened quietly while Jeff recounted his and Norby's experiences on Jamya. "In summary," Fargo said, "we are faced with friendly dragons and villainous robots."

"Yes," said Jeff, "and the only mode of escape is a small robot who not only can't handle hyperspace with accuracy, but who also gets you to the right place at the wrong time and nearly freezes you to death."

"Well, I like that!" said Norby, leaving the computer. "And here I worked my circuits to the bone for you!"

"It seems to me," said Fargo, "that there's unfinished business on Jamya. I vote for landing."

"So do I," said Norby. "I keep yearning for that planet."

"I'm against it," said Jeff. "Never trouble trouble till…"

"Two against one," Fargo and Norby said simultaneously.

"The only trouble is," Fargo said, a couple of hours later, "that the computer informs me there's some sort of force barrier around the planet."

"Right," said Jeff with sudden satisfaction. "Zi told me the Jamyns weren't allowed to travel to other planets, and I presume people from other planets aren't allowed to travel to Jamya. She said we were the first visitors ever. So let's go somewhere else."

Norby said, "We got to Jamya before because we used hyperdrive and went past the barrier by going out of normal space. All we have to do is to use hyperdrive now."

"Wait," Jeff said. He knew Fargo and he knew Norby, and there wasn't much use trying to talk sense to either of them. The only thing to do was to place another problem before them and then, maybe, he could get some sleep. With his eyelids drooping on their own, what he needed very badly was a little unconsciousness. After that, he might be able to face Jamya. "Don't you think you ought to find out why the Mentors want that hassock?" he asked.

"Isn't the best way of finding that out simply to ask the Mentors?" Fargo asked.

"No," Jeff said earnestly. "They never thought about the hassock till Norby mentioned it. Maybe they don't know what's in it. And it's Norby who thinks he can open it if he can work out the meaning of all that stuff around the sides."

"You're right. Sensible boy! Norby, make a note-your young owner has the makings of a brilliant adult."

"Yes, Fargo," Norby said, "I have always suspected that. It isn't easy to decipher the designs on the hassock, though."

Jeff heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm sure it isn't, so just take your time Norby, and don't hurry it. And while you're working I'll catch up on

some much-needed sleep. Fargo, please, don't do anything while I'm sleeping!"

Fargo yawned. "I won't," he said. "I could use a little nap myself." He leaned back in his chair, pushed his pilot's cap over his eyes and was, in fact, asleep almost before Jeff was.

Eight hours later Fargo and Jeff were eating breakfast while Norby was trying to explain that the Others' code was extremely difficult.

"But why?" asked Jeff. "You understand the Jamyn language, so why can't you read their writing?"

"Because it's not just writing. It's code!" said Norby, a bit shrilly. " And it may not be Jamyn. This is probably a code used by the Others-whoever they are-and it may not be coded from the Jamyn language. Anyway, I've got part of it. The first half says 'All-purpose.' At least, I think it does."

"All-purpose what?" asked Jeff.

"I don't know. I can't make out the second half."

Fargo grinned and took the last synthobiscuit. "All-purpose flour? All-purpose weapon?"

"It probably just means all-purpose cushion," said Jeff, discouraged. "That's what the hassock was used as. The dragons used it to rest their tails on. It was apparently very good for that. And I suppose you're no nearer to opening it now than you were at the start."

"No." The little robot's eyelids lowered halfway, and Jeff almost expected a teardrop of oil to come out.

"Any hints?" asked Fargo. "I mean, as far as opening it is concerned."

"Well, besides the words calling the hassock an all-purpose something, there are numbers. They come in batches in an odd pattern."

"Show me," said Fargo.

He and Norby huddled over the print-out from the computer, which represented Norby's attempts to solve the riddle of the hassock.

As for Jeff, he stared at the viewscreen while the other two muttered to each other. The planet, Jamya, seemed to swing in the black ocean of space, wreathed with clouds. He thought he could see blue ocean and green-brown landmasses beneath the clouds-or was it just one large landmass? Were the dragons the only intelligent creatures on Jamya? Jeff thought they probably were, because Zi had not mentioned any other civilized creatures besides the Mentors.

And what of the Mentors? Why did they want the hassock? And what task had they wanted Jeff to perform? They had never gotten around to describing that. What could one boy do that the Mentors

and their powerful computer could not?

Jeff shook his head. He couldn't figure it out. He hoped Norby was doing better with the hassock.

Meanwhile Fargo said, "If that part of the code stands for numbers, it may be a double code with the numbers standing for words."

"If so, Fargo, it's too much for me," Norby said. "I'm just a small stupid robot and you mustn't expect too much of me."

Jeff realized that things were pretty bad for Norby to whine along those lines.

"Let up for a while, Fargo. Why don't we just sit and sing for a while until our brains clear."

There was a long pause while Fargo simply stared at his younger brother. Then he pounded his right fist into his left palm. "My brother is a genius."

"Why? What did I do?"

Fargo was too busy laughing to answer, so Norby answered for him.

"I think," he said, "that Fargo's decided that the numbers on the hassock stand for musical notes. I think he's right. As soon as you mentioned music, Jeff, my brain told me it was the solution. I'm surprised Fargo saw it, too. You both have your moments-for human beings."

It took another hour, but, with the help of Norby and the Hopeful's computer, Fargo decided he had the song.

"Shall I sing it?"

"Yes!" said Norby.

"No!" said Jeff. "Let me get a stun gun first, in case the hassock turns out to be a lethal robot machine of the Others."

"We don't have any stun guns," Fargo said cheerfully. "You know my motto 'clever words are all you need.' "

"Albany uses karate," said Jeff.

"Well," said Fargo, shrugging, "beautiful women have their ways. If there's a nasty little machine inside that hassock, we'll make it Norby's responsibility to deal with it."

"Why me?" asked Norby.

"Because you have your moments-for a robot."

Jeff laughed. "Well, then, go ahead, Fargo. Sing."

Fargo sang the coded notes. After the last note rang out, they watched the hassock. Nothing happened.

"Wrong rhythm, do you suppose?" Fargo asked.

"I think it should be in a minor key," said Norby, "now that I come to think of it."

"If you didn't have your thought processes mixed up," said Jeff,

"you'd come to think of it beforehand instead of afterward."

"Better afterward than not at all," said Norby loftily. "My alien machinery has been a big help to you. How far would you have gotten on this hassock without me?"

"True enough," said Jeff.

Fargo sang again, a sad song this time, slow and melancholy, and Jeff wondered what the hassock might contain that had to be released in this sorrowful fashion.

The song ended. The three in the control room, and the ship's computer, too, were all silent. Outside, the planet Jamya was also silent.

But something began to happen. The hassock cover seemed to be getting thinner, lighter-and suddenly it cracked in two, the halves falling apart like a neatly struck eggshell.

"By all the satellites of Jupiter," said Fargo, "what is that?"

It was green and fuzzy-or maybe they were fuzzy scales, or scales so small and neat as to look like fuzz. Whatever it was, it looked like another dragon, all curled up with its head hidden.

The creature uncurled, shook itself, and the scales became much fuzzier. It was a small animal about the size of a cat, with a round head and tiny pointed ears, a thin gold collar, and an odd snout with fangs.

Fargo backed away. "Norby, do you think we ought to be protected from that fanged thing?"

Norby did nothing but stare at the creature.

"Is it familiar to you, Norby?" Jeff asked in Jamyn, hoping the creature would understand.

Its small ears pricked up, but the animal only yawned. It shook itself once more, stretched, and began to circumnavigate the control room-sniffing at everything and waving its long, very fuzzy tail.

"When cats wave their tails, it means they're angry," said Fargo.

"But when dogs do, they're happy," said Jeff. "If this is like the dragons, it ought to be able to understand when we speak Jamyn."

"As a matter of fact," said Norby, "it's a 'she,' and she doesn't talk. She's not very bright, you see, but she's not dangerous, either. I remember now."

"Why was she hidden away like that in the hassock?"

"I can't quite figure that out."

"How do you know it's a 'she'?" asked Fargo.

"They all are. Like the dragons. Only this type lays eggs."

The fuzzy green creature got as far as Jeff and stood on her hind legs to sniff him. He put out his hand and let her sniff that, too. She didn't bite, but bumped her head under his palm as if she wanted him to stroke her. Automatically, he did so, thinking that she acted just

like a cat, even if she didn't feel like one. She felt both soft and bristly, a combination that Jeff couldn't find words to describe.

"I always wanted a cat," he said.

Under his hand, the creature began to change-the snout receding, the ears and tail lengthening, the fangs disappearing. "Meow!" it said softly.

"It is a cat," said Fargo. "Come here, kitty!"

The creature ran to Fargo.

"Nice kitty," he said as he stroked her, "Can you be a dog?"

It was even more amazing. She changed her body contours until she looked very much like a dog. "Woof!" she said.

"Now I remember," said Norby. "That's an All-Purpose Pet."

Jeff said, "The Others may not be so bad after all. I like their taste in pets."

"Let's hope she continues to like us, "said Fargo, cuddling the All-Purpose Pet, who now resembled a very green beagle (Fargo had always been partial to beagles). She licked his ear and purred.

"Beagles aren't supposed to purr," said Jeff, somewhat annoyed. He couldn't understand why females seemed to like Fargo best. He was glad he had Norby, who wasn't at all cuddly, but was his robot and never showed any signs of wanting to like anyone else instead.

Fargo said, "Let her purr. I'm going to name her Oola!"

"Why Oola?" Jeff asked.

"Because it seems to fit her," Fargo said.

The All-Purpose Pet pricked up her ears, now long and drooping, and whined a little.

Fargo chucked her under the chin and said, "How about that? Do you like your name-Oola?"

She patted Fargo's face with her paw-more like a cat than a dog-and grinned, with her tongue hanging out.

"See," said Fargo. "It's her name. She admits it."

"You've got a pet that's half beagle and half Cheshire cat," said Jeff, "and she'll probably change to fit everyone's mental wish and you'll never know what you've got." He still felt a bit jealous. "I wonder where the Others got her?"

"Made her, probably," said Norby. "Some day on our travels we'll find the animals the Others took genes from to do the biosynthesis of this one. And don't ask me how I know this!"

"We won't," said Jeff, while Fargo continued to play with Oola. "But I do think, Norby, it's time for you to tell us why you brought us back to Jamya-before we go down there to risk life and limb."

There was a long silence. Finally Norby spoke very softly.

"Because I think it's home," he said. "More and more, I think it's home-my home. and I don't want to be afraid of home."

7. More Time And Trouble

A cold apprehension gripped Jeff. It had nothing to do with the Mentors. Was Norby going to begin to feel as though he were a Jamyn? Wasn't part of him Terran? Was he going to choose between his two parts and turn his back on Jeff?

"Hey, Norby," Jeff said, sounding as jovial as he could, to conceal his feelings. "Don't get upset. We'll help you discover all about Jamya and you'll find there's nothing to fear."

The trouble was, Jeff thought inwardly, that he had been making entirely too many caustic remarks about Norby's being mixed up.

"The Mentors are after you, Jeff," Norby said. "I don't know why they think they can use you, but I don't think you ought to take the chance. I'd better go down to the planet without you. I can always escape them by moving into hyperspace."

"Oh, no," Jeff said. "You're not getting away from me-I mean, I can't let you take any chances without me. You and I are a team, an inseparable team, now and always. Right, Norby?"

"If I may interrupt this dialog," said Fargo with a grin on his face, "I'd like to point out that I am the senior member of this expedition, so I have to be consulted when decisions are made. I say that we're all going. Together. You don't think, do you, that I'm going to sit here and spend my time wondering what's happening to my little brother and his robot?"

"Well," said Norby, "that would be three of us against the villains-providing I don't have to spend all my time rescuing you two."

"There'll be some spare time for you to hide behind us, Norby," said Fargo, stroking Oola, who was lying in his lap.

"Leave Norby alone, Fargo," Jeff said. "He never hides behind anybody."

"I don't?" Norby said in a surprised tone.

"Besides," Jeff hurried on, "I have an idea. Those Mentors down there seemed very dangerous and not likely to listen to reason. But they are all very old and lots of them are dead and maybe they've deteriorated with time. After all, they were put on Jamya by the Others to teach the Jamyn how to be civilized. Why don't we go backward in time to when Jamya was first found by the Others and before they put up the force barrier? Maybe we'll speak to the young Mentors when they were healthy and reasonable."

"Hmm," murmured Fargo, "and then we'd know what the Others were like. Not a bad idea."

"I don't like it," Norby said. "The Others were probably more dangerous than the Mentors."

"Do you remember that they were?" Jeff asked.

"Well, no. I feel as though no part of me came into existence until long after the Others left, so I guess I wouldn't know anything about them."

"Are you telling us," Fargo asked, "that some of your parts are the creation of the Mentors?"

"That could be," Norby said. "I don't really know. I can't even remember what I used to be. Maybe I wasn't really a robot. Maybe I was a computer on that spaceship that McGillicuddy found. Anyway, I'm scared of the Others."

"Then we won't go back that far in time," Jeff said. "Do you think you can take us back the right amount if all of us concentrate on young Mentors?"

"Well," said Norby, "Fargo can't help, but you and I can join telepathically, and I'll try to link myself with the Hopeful, too, and we'll go back to soon after the Mentors arrived-I hope."

"Good! I'm sure the young Mentors will be reasonable," said Jeff. "Come here, Norby. Sit at the ship's computer, and I'll hold your hand."

A little wire pushed out of Norby's hat and inserted itself into the ship's computer. His hand grabbed Jeff's and held tight.

"Okay?" Norby asked.

"I'm not afraid," said Jeff. "In fact, I'm completely confident in you, Norby. If we could get back from the Ice Age smack into the Hopeful's control room, we ought to be able to move the Hopeful back into time with pinpoint accuracy."

Jeff closed his eyes so he could concentrate better-also to shut out the doubting expression on his brother's face. So what if Norby got things wrong now and then? Think of all the things he got right! Norby kept saying that, and he was right, too!

Now…concentrate on Jamya…move back…back… to a much earlier time…think of Mentors, with shiny metal, moving easily, resonant, pleasant voices.

"Jeff!" Fargo's voice was urgent. "Norby! The two of you-come out of it!"

"What…what…" Jeff came to, blearily. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. You two have been still and silent for half an hour. You didn't tell me how this works, either of you. Does it take you that long to do it?"

"I don't know. Didn't anything happen?"

"Nothing at all. I had a momentary sensation of dizziness at the start, but it passed, and here we still are and there Jamya still is."

Norby was quite conscious, too, for he made a snorting noise and pulled his wire out of the computer. "Of course, we're still here and

Jamya is still there, but the position of its sun is different. It's now spring in the continent where the dragons live-a long ago spring."

"You mean we've moved back in time?"

"Of course!"

"In that case," said Fargo. "Get out of my chair, little robot, and let me take us down to this planet of yours."

He put Oola on the control room floor, where she sat placidly, and licked herself like a cat while still looking like a beagle.

Down they went, skimming across the Jamyn continent.

Jeff said, "Can you find Zi's castle, Norby? You did that two times before without trouble."

"In our time, Jeff. The castle doesn't exist at this time in the past."

"I mean…Locate the place where the castle will some day exist?"

"I get no feel for it," said Norby, sounding worried.

The Hopeful skimmed low over the planetary ocean and headed back over the continent again.

"Trees. Lots of trees," Fargo said. "Those sea creatures that looked up at us might be interesting."

"No," said Norby sharply. 'The Mentors chose land creatures to civilize. Maybe we went back too far. Maybe there's no animal life on land at all."

"Not likely," Fargo said, "when it's so richly forested and vegetated. See, there's a group of animals below in the grassland." He sent the Hopeful downward in a sharply banked curve for a closer view. 'They look something like bipedal dinosaurs, but I don't see any sign of wings."

'That's odd," said Jeff. 'They don't even have them furled. I think they don't have any wings."

The Hopeful came in for a quiet landing and rested upon the grass at some distance from the herd. Fargo moved to open the airlock.

"Hey," said the ever cautious Jeff, "aren't you going to analyze the air outside?"

Fargo paused. "You've been here, haven't you? And you breathed. And you're alive."

"That was at a different time. Why don't you ask the computer?"

"Oh, well." Fargo looked pained. "What's the air like?"

The computer said, "Breathable. There are plant seeds and spores to which allergies might exist, but I can't test for that without more information."

"We'll chance it," Fargo said, as he picked up Oola.

They moved out on the grass, which was waving in the wind. It was rather cool, but Jeff remembered the glacier and decided that he could get along easily with this kind of coolness.

Jeff said, "I'll just step over there and speak to the dragons. I can

speak Jamyn, you know."

"Look out!" yelled Norby, tugging at Jeff's pant legs.

The dragons were approaching en masse, and at a run. They were also speaking, but not in Jamyn. Their language, if it could be called that, consisted entirely of loud roars, screeches, and hisses, punctuated by little puffs of smoke from their nostrils.

"Jeff, old boy," said Fargo, trying to control Oola, who was snarling and barking alternately. 'These are not friends of yours. It's my opinion we had better get back into the ship at once."

Without arguing the matter, they did so, shutting the airlock behind them.

"I thought you told me that the dragons were smaller than human beings," Fargo said.

These were as big as the Hopeful. In the viewscreen, they could see the dragons swarming over the ship, trying to find a place to bite. Their fangs sounded like jackhammers upon the hull.

"Fargo," Jeff said, "I don't think their teeth are made of ivory. They look shiny, as if they were made of metal, or of diamonds."

"You're right, Jeff, and they may damage us." He moved to the controls. "We'll have to get away."

"They aren't speaking Jamyn," said Norby unnecessarily. "I don't think they've ever been civilized."

Fargo moved the Hopeful slowly upward on antigrav so that the dragons clutching at the hull gradually peeled off. The huge animals were now spouting flames in their frustration. Fargo seemed fascinated.

"From a whiff I got outside," he said, "I think they make their flames by splitting hydrogen sulfide…"

"The computer says the hull is heating under those flames," said Norby. "We should get back into orbit."

Again there was no attempt to argue the matter, and the ship rose precipitously. When it was safely in orbit, the three had another conclave, while Oola chased her tail round and round in the control room.

"My feeling is," Fargo said, "that we did get back to a time before the Others, even before the Mentors created a civilization on this planet. We went backward in time too far."

"I think that's my fault," Jeff said. "Not Norby's. He did very well. It's just that when Norby and I were linked and trying to move backward in time, I felt some kind of fear, and perhaps that threw us off."

"You weren't feeling my fear," said Norby, sounding outraged. "I was certainly not afraid."

"No, no," said Jeff. "You don't understand. You see, I was thinking

of the Mentors very hard. And I felt something about them that I must have felt when I was in their scanning room, but didn't realize I'd felt because I was too full of my own fears. Do you understand what I mean?" He looked at Fargo helplessly.

Fargo said, "Sure, but what was it you felt without knowing you felt it?"

"It was the Mentor who was afraid. I was feeling its fear when we were trying to move in time."

"Was the Mentor afraid of you, do you suppose?"

"No."

"Of the Others?" Norby asked.

"I don't think so," said Jeff. "The Mentor was awfully afraid, though, and he needed me. I don't know what for, but it had something to do with his fear."

"If he is afraid of something and needs your help," Fargo said, "it doesn't seem to me he can afford to do us any harm."

Sounding doubtful, Jeff asked, "Should we go forward, then, and see if we can find the young Mentors?"

"Can we?" said Fargo with a grin. "It's up to you two."

"Let's try again, Jeff," Norby said. "Maybe there's nothing to fear. Maybe it was only Mentors' fear that made you afraid."

Jeff almost said, 'You were more afraid than I was,' but he pressed his lips together and didn't say it. Instead, he held out his hand. "Sure," he said, "let's try again."

Half an hour later they gave up.

"No dizziness, no nothing," said Fargo. "I guess we're still in the same time."

"Well," said Norby, "it seems to be very different to go into a time I've already existed in. It's easier to move to a time earlier or later than when I've been there. Do you know what I mean? I tried to push us all forward until we were well past where the Mentors showed up, but I couldn't seem to do it."

"In that case," said Jeff, with a sinking feeling, "that would mean that you, or parts of you, were present on Jamya sometime after the Mentors appeared, just as you thought you might be. I guess you're really Jamyn."

"I suppose so," said Norby. "It's exciting, isn't it?"

Jeff didn't think so. But all he said was, "Can you slide forward only a little into the future, before the time when you were constructed?"

"I can try."

"I can see where it's difficult to move to a time where you've already existed," Fargo said, "because one of the big paradoxes of time-travel involves the possibility of meeting yourself. Still, why

don't we go really far into the future and find out what happened to us in the Jamyn historical records of the future, so that we'll know what to do to fix everything up? That would be exciting!"

"That sounds like another paradox to me," Jeff said, sounding unhappy. "I don't think we can do that. The future isn't all written out. Suppose we find out that we were killed when we went back to Jamya. Then we would be in despair and give up and that might be why we were killed."

"I don't understand that," said Norby, "but I don't want to be killed."

"Don't worry, little robot," Fargo said, "we won't let that happen, but I see Jeff's point. All right, Norby, just move us up into the nearest part of the future you can manage, shortly after the Mentors begin to work."

Jeff and Norby tried again. This time Jeff visualized a young Mentor and tried to feel full of confidence. He was distracted because Oola suddenly began to howl like a lost hound.

"Hush, hush, my beauty," said Fargo, stroking her long ears as she sat quivering, pressed against his leg. She stopped howling, but she whimpered instead.

Jeff was about to say, "Let's try it again, Norby," when Fargo cried out without any trace of his usual humor. "Wait! She's gone. Oola's gone."

8. Not Dangerous Enough?

Jeff looked about in astonishment, and the viewscreen caught his eye. Jamya was much closer. Norby must have been clever enough to move them nearer to the planet as they moved in time, presumably to put them inside the force screen once it was set up. But what about Oola? She certainly was not in the control room.

Jeff said, "Maybe she's in the sleeping quarters. Maybe we all blacked out."

But Fargo was already out of the room searching. A few minutes later he was back, his face deeply troubled. "She's not inside the ship."

"Oh, my," said Norby. "I never thought of her."

"You mean you forgot to bring her forward with us?" Jeff asked. Then, when Norby failed to answer, Jeff shook him. "Well? Say something."

"Don't rattle my works," Norby said. "I'm trying to figure it out, and getting me all jarred inside doesn't help. It's not my fault. I suppose she exists in this time somewhere and it was, therefore, much more difficult for the Oola of the future, our Oola, to exist here than for us. And I didn't allow for that and she couldn't come along-I think."

"If that were so, we could find her here, in this time," said Fargo.

"What time is this time?" Jeff asked. "When are we?"

"I don't know," said Norby in a querulous tone. "I get all mixed up with all these crises and with getting shaken and everything."

Fargo and Jeff looked at each other. Jeff said, "It's my fault, Fargo. I should never have suggested time travel; at least not involving you and Oola and the Hopeful. Norby and I should have taken our chances alone."

"Don't be foolish," Fargo said. "You couldn't leave me out of this. We'll just find Oola here and now."

"Yes, but that will be before she was put into suspended animation and before we released her from the hassock capsule, and she won't remember us."

"Then she'll learn about us allover again; or, rather, all over previously, for this time is long before the time we got her."

"We don't even know how long before," muttered Jeff.

"It's not my fault," shouted Norby.

"It doesn't matter," Fargo said. "We have to explore the planet, Oola or no Oola. Knowledge is better than ignorance, even if it's sometimes more uncomfortable, so down we go for a landing."

"There's the castle!" Jeff said, as the Hopeful skimmed along above the treetops after a number of passes over the continent, with Norby guiding them very uncertainly.

Norby said, "See! Didn't I tell you I could lead you there?"

"On the twenty-fifth pass," said Jeff.

"The tenth," countered Norby. "Maybe the ninth. You don't know how to count."

Jeff remembered that he wanted to be nicer to Norby. "That's true!" he said. "You did a very good job."

But Norby just said, "Huh!"

Jeff said, "I don't see any of the small buildings where dragons like Zi live; just the big castle."

"That's a good sign," said Fargo. "You can see a number of huge robots there, and they're all busy doing something or other. The small buildings haven't been built yet, I suppose. Maybe the small dragons haven't even evolved."

"Yes," said Norby. "Everything has just begun. All the Mentors are new."

"Oh?" said Jeff. "If you know that, why did you tell us you didn't know what time it is?"

"Because I didn't," said Norby indignantly, "but that doesn't mean I can't use my eyes. Look at those robots. Can't you see that they're shiny? They're nothing like those old wrecks you and I saw in the castle when we were there before-I mean later-I mean before in our lives but later in time."

"I know what you mean," said Jeff and Fargo, speaking together.

The robots were watching them as the Hopeful sank to rest just before the castle. The biggest signaled to the rest, who went inside the castle. Then the one remaining robot walked up to the ship.

"Message from outside on my radio pickup," said the Hope.ful's computer.

"Let's hear it," said Fargo.

It came promptly in forceful, clearly enunciated words: "Strangers, you have entered our planetary space without permission. Speak and reveal yourselves and your purpose."

The language was, of course, Jamyn, and Norby translated for Fargo.

"I think it would be more polite to answer from the airlock, in person," said Fargo. "It shouldn't be too risky. The airlock door can be closed quickly if the Mentor makes a sudden move. And since you speak Jamyn, younger brother, you'll have to be the one to take the chance."

"Maybe I should be the one to do it," said Norby, "I speak Jamyn like a native."

"No," said Jeff, who didn't like Norby's reference to being a native. "I think it would confuse the Mentor if you appeared. He's probably never seen a robot like you, and if he can sense that you are part

Jamyn, he'll wonder how you came to be on this spaceship. I don't think it's a good idea for them to find out we're from the future. In fact," Jeff frowned and shook his head, "suppose we do or say something that changes the future?"

"Just being here and being seen may have done that, " said Fargo, "but what's the difference? Now that we are here, let's see it through. These robots may look like newer versions of the ones you met in our own time, but they don't give me the impression of being aggressive. They seem reasonable."

"I don't know what you base that on, Fargo," said Jeff, "but if you really think so…Hey, look at that! There's Oola!"

Oola, or a creature exactly like the one who had originally emerged from the hassock, bounded out of the castle and stopped beside the Mentor who had spoken. She wagged her tail.

Jeff said, "She must have realized we're here."

"No," said Norby. "Don't be ridiculous. You two haven't been born yet. She can't possibly…"

"And it might not be our own Oola," said Fargo, sounding a bit depressed at the thought. "There are probably lots of All-purpose Pets on this world, just as there are lots of big robots. Presumably, they've only just begun to unpack the little gardening robots and those police robots you saw running around the castle."

The computer said, "The message from outside has just been repeated a bit more forcibly."

"We'd better get going," said Jeff with a sigh. He opened the airlock and stood just inside the outer door. He smiled in what he hoped would seem like a friendly fashion, then he remembered that on Earth some animals thought baring the teeth was a sign of hostility. He looked serious at once and said, in Jamyn, "I greet you."

"Ah," said the Mentor in a deep voice. "You know our language."

"Yes:' said Jeff. "We are friendly people who are interested in this world which we have come upon in our travels. We hope you will help us by explaining what your world is like, who you are, and what you are doing here." He spoke very slowly, trying not to make any unfortunate mistake in his Jamyn, and trying also not to give away too much about themselves. Behind him, he could hear Norby translating for Fargo.

The Mentor stared at Jeff as though it were uncertain what to say in response to the boy's bold statement. And while the silence held, the All-Purpose Pet suddenly changed her shape.

"What's she doing?" asked Fargo in a whisper from behind him.

Jeff whispered. "I was trying to concentrate on her because looking at the Mentor makes me a little nervous, and it just occurred to me that our Oola had never gotten round to looking like a bear and

this one changed immediately."

The Mentor looked down at the All-Purpose Pet who might or might not have been Oola. The little bear was sitting on its haunches and waving its forepaws at Jeff.

"Interesting:' said the Mentor. "According to data left in our main computer by those who made us, there were creatures in the form of this little one, but much larger, on an icy planet they visited. There were also creatures rather like you in appearance whom they took to another planet for a suitable civilizing procedure. Are you those specimens?"

"No," said Jeff. "We travel on our own. Did your makers take a cave bear, too-the creature that, in form, was like the one beside you, now?"

"They did indeed bring specimens of various animals for us. We-I-bioengineered some creatures into this All-Purpose Pet. Some resembled the shape she had when she came out of the castle. The originals had large and undesirable fangs. I constructed something smaller and more affectionate; altogether more suitable as a pet."

"Fargo!" said Jeff, turning back to him. "I think Oola may have been bioengineered from a saber-toothed tiger-a smilodon-but there may have been some cave bear thrown in, along with other Ice Age…"

The Mentor interrupted him. "It is impolite to talk in another language that we do not know," he said in reproving tones.

"I'm sorry," said Jeff, and he tried to explain about Oola, but succeeded only in getting muddled in his attempt to avoid mention of time travel. That proved useless under the penetrating stare of the large robot.

"I think I understand," said the Mentor. "I doubt, though, that these animals you speak of, smilodons and cave bears, are your contemporaries. You do not speak of them as though that were true, and you are sufficiently different in behavior from the specimens taken by our makers to make it reasonable to suppose you are from the future of that planet. If you are, do not tell us anything about the future, because we do not want to know."

"Smart robot," muttered Fargo, when he heard the translation.

"We are in trouble," said Jeff, carefully refraining from comment on what the robot had said about the future. "We need to know who you are and what you are doing on Jamya."

"We Mentors," said the robot, "were activated by the main computer in the castle. It is our task to bioengineer the most promising species on this planet and to train them to become civilized and self-sufficient. You have met the Jamyn?"

"We've seen them. Large animals."

"Too large. And too stupid. We'll change that, though, for they

have definite possibilities. For that, we need a simple planet like this with one landmass and one intelligent species. We are here to keep-to keep-a home going."

The big robot looked down at his feet, as if he were emotionally upset. Jeff thought it wasn't any wonder that Norby had emotive circuits.

"A home for the Others?" Jeff said.

The robot's huge head turned up to Jeff. "You know of the Others? I referred to them only as our makers."

"Only that they exist. What are they like? When will they return here?"

"I am disappointed," said the Mentor. "I had hoped you would know. Before they left the castle and its computer on this planet, Jamya, they erased from the computer all knowledge of their appearance and former history. All that is left in the computer is the bare fact that they existed, and were here for a time. After they left, the computer activated us and we began our work, but we wonder about the Others. We would like to know the organic creatures who made us."

"How do you know they were organic? Perhaps they were robots, too."

"There is physical evidence that they were organic. There were the remains of food-preparing machines. There were cremation ashes which we analyzed and which seemed to show residues of proteins and nucleic acids such as those in the living creatures of this planet and, no doubt, in you."

"Could you deduce anything about the appearance of the Others?"

"They could not have looked like you because your bodies have the wrong shape to use their equipment, but that is about all we can say. It is a problem that bothers us considerably."

"Jeff," whispered Fargo with clear worry, "I think we've got to know. Ask him if the Others bioengineered the primitive human beings they found on Ice-Age Earth, and if that's what he meant by saying we were different from the people that were found there."

Jeff's hands went cold at the possibility that the human species was the product of interstellar meddling, but he put the question to the Mentor in carefully phrased Jamyn.

"You seem concerned at the possibility, small organic friend," said the Mentor, "if I may call you that. By now, I have sensed your friendship and good will. There is no record that the Others did anything to your people except remove a few specimens to educate and put on another planet-we don't know where. It is only Jamya that seems to be getting special treatment. We hope it is because the Others want it for their own home. For that, we Mentors get it ready."

Jeff felt intense relief that the difference the Mentor had detected had lain in their wearing textile material rather than furs-or something like that. And then he felt silly. The evolutionary record of mankind was too smooth to suppose there had been outside meddling.

He looked down at the All-Purpose Pet. "Did the Others want you to develop an All-Purpose Pet?"

The Mentor took a step backward. Its eye patches dimmed. "No, that was my idea. It seemed to me that a Mentor might enjoy a pet. I also thought that some of the offspring of such a pet might be useful as exchange items in dealing with visitors to this planet, but then I found instructions left by the Others forbidding trade. It turned out the Others had also placed a force barrier around the planet to keep outsiders from coming here. That was one of our concerns when your ship suddenly appeared. How did you jump the barrier?"

Jeff said, "We have a special ship that can come or go through hyperspace anywhere."

"I hope," added Norby in a small voice.

Fargo poked Jeff. "Ask if we can exchange something for the All-Purpose Pet. I want Oola back. I have this craving for that little thing. Funny, considering the short acquaintance."

"You spoke of using your pet for trade-exchange with outsiders. Is there anything we can exchange for the creature?" began Jeff. "We have…"

But the Mentor's eye patches shone red, and Jeff stopped.

"No!" The Mentor snatched up his pet and held her in his lower two arms. The upper two arms were drawn up, fists clenched. "I said I would exchange some of her young. She has not had any yet and I do not yet know if she can have young. So I am going to keep her. She is my experiment. I am different from the rest of the Mentors. I am-innovative."

Jeff felt he had better change the subject. "Do you have a name?" he asked.

"I am First."

"Ask about me, Jeff!" said Norby.

"Mentor First, do you have any small robots?"

'Those you see-for gardening, for construction, for discipline with respect to organic creatures, and so on. They are not intelligent, but they obey our commands."

"Do you have any others we don't see?"

"No."

"Do you take commands from the main computer in the castle?"

"No. We are self-controlled under my general guidance, of course. The castle computer does not have the consciousness we do and it is merely our tool."

Jeff could not help thinking that the robot seemed very proud of its own superiority to all the others, and that it was this that led it on to giving information freely-information that might turn out to be useful.

It was almost as though Mentor First caught a whiff of this thought, for he said, "You ask too many questions. You disturb my peace of mind, and your presence here and the thoughts you have induced in me may change the future. I will ask the castle computer to wipe out the memories of you from my mind."

The Mentor's eyes flared red once more. Odd metal eyelids drew up from the bottom, covering the eye patches completely. "Go back to your own time, or we will take forceful measures to destroy you."

There was the feel of danger, and to Jeff it seemed only sensible to retreat into the ship and shut the airlock door. In the viewscreen, he could see Mentor First standing there, waiting for the ship to leave, while Norby was translating to Fargo.

Jeff said, looking a little shamefaced, "I'm sorry, Norby. We didn't find out about your origins, or about the Others-except that they were organic and not robots-but it's getting dangerous here, and I'm sure we might end by changing the future."

Fargo hesitated, then he strode to the control room chair, seated himself in it, and called out, "Norby! Come here and plug yourself in. We can go back to our own solar system, in our own time, and do some exploring for McGillicuddy's asteroid, the one where he found your alien ship. That will keep you out of the hands of the Inventors Union, and it might be more exciting than this. "

"Wasn't this exciting?" Jeff asked.

"What? A reasonable conversation? Very tame!"

"Isn't it exciting to learn things? When the Mentors were new, they had no robot like Norby; that's why he can be here. But Mentor First bioengineered Oola for himself and is emotional about her. And she's here, which is why our Oola couldn't be here. But that still leaves the problem of why the Mentors became so angry and villainous later in time, and we ought to find out why."

Fargo said, "That Mentor First of yours seems to be getting angry and villainous. He's ordering up some machinery and it may be some sort of weapon."

'Then let's leave," said Jeff, "but let's go back to our present time in Jamya."

"Yes!" Norby said, loudly. "I want to find out why I was made. The Mentors here don't know about me, but I'm sure part of me is Jamyn. I know I was never part of these gardening robots because they don't have emotive circuits or imagination. Jeff, take my hand, and I'll try to move the whole ship forward in time to when you and I left

Jamya."

"Well," said Fargo, settling back in the chair with a shrug, "back to something old. Everything will continue to be tame."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd been inside the Mentors' computer scanner," Jeff said. "Go forward, Norby. I'll visualize the castle as we first saw it."

This time the ship itself seemed to shiver.

"There's a miniature dragon outside," Fargo said. "I tell you again. Everything will be tame.:'

9. Not So Tame

"Hello," said Zargl. "You're back. You shouldn't be."

Jeff waved at her as he left the Hopeful, followed by Norby and Fargo. Then he waved at Zi, who was coming out of her home rather hurriedly at the sight of the ship.

"This is my sibling, Fargo," he said to mother and daughter dragon, pronouncing the name carefully. He hesitated before choosing the Jamyn word to describe Fargo's relationship to him. There was no Jamyn word for "brother," of course.

Jeff then asked, with a fine air of casualness, "How long have we been gone?"

"Fourteen day/nights," said Zargl. "Ever since you left, the Jamyns have been arguing about what to do if you returned. The Mentors sent word that you are to be captured and taken to the castle if we ever see you again. Isn't that exciting? Of course, they didn't expect you to come with a ship and reinforcements."

"Which probably makes it even more exciting," muttered Fargo, as Norby translated softly for him. "Maybe things won't be so tame at that. Ask this Pseudoreptile to bite me so I'll be able to understand her language."

"Good idea," said Jeff. "Then if things don't live up to your notions of danger and adventure, you'll at least be able to tell Albany that you were bitten by a dragon. And you, Norby, you can tell her how you missed by a couple of weeks again."

Norby said haughtily, "Can you do better, Jeff?"

Jeff, still mindful of his manners, said, "No, I can't. True is true. Zargl, would you bite my sibling, just a little bit. Just a tiny little bit."

Zargl said, "Certainly." She came shyly up to Fargo, and nuzzled his arm. "Your sibling is very attractive," she said to Jeff.

"There you are," said Jeff. "The girls always fall for him."

Fargo smiled. "It's to be expected. No one can resist my devil-may-care attitude and my incredible charm."

"It's the way he shows his little teeth," she said, showing her own much larger ones. Then she nipped a bit of flesh on Fargo's forearm between an opposing pair of her sharp teeth.

Fargo said, "Ouch," and frowned at the tiny droplet of blood that seeped from each of two delicate puncture marks.

"There you are," said Jeff. "The knowledge is transmitted by the blood somehow. The bite is so neatly done, it won't even bruise. In a few minutes, you'll be able to catch the Jamyn words telepathically, and not long after that you will understand them spoken aloud, and be able to speak them yourself."

Fargo waved his arm. "I wish they could teach differential equations that way."

Zi, who had been looking at the Hopeful very carefully, now pointed her right front claw at it and said, "What's that?"

"That's our small scoutship," Jeff explained. "It's ours free and clear; in fact, it was all we had left when the family business failed a few years ago…"

"Look at that'" said Fargo, with sudden energy. "Jeff, do you see what I see?"

Jeff turned to look at the Hopeful and there in the open airlock was a green creature peering up at the castle, and panting.

"Oola!" cried out Jeff in astonishment. "I'll bet she automatically joined us when we went forward in time past the point when we opened the hassock."

"She seems to know the castle," Fargo said. "Look at her reacting to it."

Zi said, "I have never seen a creature like that before. How can she know the castle if I have never seen her?"

"Oola was inside your hassock," said Jeff, "the one you let us have. She was bioengineered by a particular Mentor named First."

"First?" Zi scratched her tail. "He is an important part of our legends. The great Mentor named First organized the construction of the buildings on Jamyn, and carried out the instructions of the Others for the civilizing of the Jamyn and, as you see, did a very good job of it. All Jamyn are in awe of First and feel great respect for him."

"And where is First, now?"

"No one knows. Perhaps he is still at the castle. Perhaps he was the one that spoke to you on my computer screen."

"That can't be," said Jeff. "The Mentor who spoke to me, and who saw me in the castle, was malevolent."

A bell chimed in the dragons' house. "Excuse me," said Zi. "Zargl, come with me and begin the preparations of a meal for our guests, while I find out what the Grand Dragonship wants." In a lower-pitched version of her voice, she said to Jeff and Norby "It is a great honor for her to call upon a mere Congressperson such as myself". She seemed to breathe quickly at the thought of it.

Left to themselves for a moment, Jeff said in Terran Basic, "Fargo, things seem no different here than when we left. Zi remembers our previous visit just as we do. Doesn't that mean that our visit to the past of Jamya didn't change anything?"

"Let's hope so," Fargo said.

Norby, however, teetered nervously on his partly extended legs. "I can tell, Jeff, I can tell. I can sense that nothing important has changed. Mentor First must really have had his memories of us wiped

out. And that means that the Mentors in the castle right now are still crazy and mean."

"Good," said Fargo. "Maybe that will mean a chance for us to be battling real nasties."

Zi came out of her house carrying a little table, and Zargl followed with dishes of food. "You'll have to sit on the lawn," she said. "Please accept my apologies for that, but I have no furniture in my home that will fit your peculiar bodies-no offense intended. Even my hassock, my tail rest, is gone, for you have changed it into an unknown green animal. Still, it's such a lovely day, I thought you might be willing to have a picnic before the Grand Dragonship arrives."

"A picnic would be very welcome," said Jeff. "And I'm looking forward to meeting such an exalted person."

"And she's my great-aunt, too," said Zargl, holding up her foreclaws and making them quiver. "Isn't she, Mother?"

"She certainly is, my dear child, and my own aunt."

Half an hour later, they were all, including Oola, finishing the meal. Oola kept looking up at the castle and twitching her tail when Norby suddenly shot up on antigrav, his foot catching Jeff's ear on the way.

"What are you doing?" asked Jeff, rubbing his ear hard.

"I want to hurry back to the Hopeful, " said Norby. "I suggest you two bring Oola and join me. Look what's coming."

From over the trees at the left of the castle, came a strange airborne procession. Majestically, a retinue of Jamyn flew toward Zi's home, and from their jeweled claws hung a glittering hammock that supported a dragon considerably larger than Zi.

"It's my aunt," cried Zi, clacking her teeth in excitement and respect. "Please do not leave. I so want you to meet her."

The hammock came overhead and was let down in front of them, dragons hovering about with a great swirl of wings to insure that it landed safely.

"Make way for her Grand Dragonship," shouted all the dragons in a medley of squawks that was totally unmusical.

When the hammock was flat on the lawn, the Grand Dragon stepped off it. She unfurled her wings, each leathery portion brightly painted in contrasting colors, and shook them. A diamondlike jewel adorned each point of the projections that went down her back to the tip of her gilded tail.

"So, my niece," she said, holding herself high with her wings akimbo to make the colors show dramatically, "you make friends with the enemy when I instructed you not to!"

"I'm sorry, Aunt-Your Dragonship-but I do like these humans and

their little robot. And Zargl and I had already made friends with them weeks ago, so it was already too late when your instructions came. And see, they have discovered this green creature that was inside my tail rest-which they call by the interesting nonsense word, 'hassock.' "

"You don't understand," said Her Dragonship. "This green creature, as you call it, is the Mentors' Pet. They have watched the situation through monitors and they have sent me to correct the theft. Otherwise we will be punished."

"Correct the theft?" asked Fargo. "What do you mean by that? The hassock was given us by your niece freely."

"Nevertheless," said the Grand Dragon, "you two strangers and your ugly robot and this pet will be brought to the Mentors."

Norby said to Jeff in a furious whisper, " Are you just going to stand there and let her call me ugly?"

Oola whined and became more like a beagle than ever.

Fargo said, "This pet is my pet. It belongs to me now."

"No, she doesn't," screamed the Grand Dragon, stamping her foot, which was large and had wicked claws on it. "My guards will prove that by overpowering you…"

"That would not be sporting, Your Dragonship," said Fargo. He paused and bent down to Norby. "Have I got the right word? Jamyn is not an easy language to learn in a great hurry."

"Say it isn't fair.., Norby said in Jamyn. "Dragons don't play sports the way you do, but they are fair."

"Surely, Your Dragonship, you have some more civilized way of settling a dispute than brainless force?" Fargo smiled his most charming smile.

The dragon guards began to move toward him, but the Grand Dragon gestured them back. "This stranger appeals to our civilized nature," she said, "and no one can appeal to that in vain. It would be an insult to the Mentors otherwise."

She smiled, too, her pointed teeth and front fangs showing to full advantage. She adjusted her jeweled gold collar and stepped forward until she was only a few centimeters from Fargo. She was a little taller than he was, and, counting the tail, considerably bigger.

"There! It will be I alone against two of you and a robot. It is three to one in your favor so it is you who will be uncivilized, yet I will personally bring all of you to the Mentors."

"Is that indeed so?" said Fargo, as he thrust out his chin.

"Fargo!" said Jeff, reverting to Terran Basic, "Let's just go with her…"

"Never!" said Fargo, pushing up his sleeves.

"Listen, you're not going to try to punch her, are you?" asked Jeff. "Her fangs will tear into your knuckles."

"Fist fighting is crude," Fargo said, adjusting his stance. "I'm going to see if I can use any of tl}e defensive arts that Albany has taught me. I wouldn't mind having a sword or rapier, though. Cold steel against hot fang, eh?"

"This isn't funny!" said Jeff. "You can't win!"

Norby was ascending and descending on his telescopic legs, forcing his way between Jeff and Fargo and shouting, "Listen to me, you human idiots! The Jamyn respect tradition and authority and they never use force among themselves!"

"Well?" asked Fargo, "Are you trying to spoil the fun?"

"Of course. Your kind of fun is no fun. But there is something else…" He rose on antigrav and whispered in Fargo's ear.

Fargo nodded, but did not change his position, "En garde, sir, I mean, madam, Your Dragonship." He moved into the ready-to-attack position.

The Grand Dragon snorted and little puffs of smoke came out of her nostrils. "There, you see! You have made me revert to the primitivism of my ancestors; you have forced me to be angry enough to breathe fire. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. "

"It would not be fair for you to use fire," Fargo said.

"I do not intend to. I will cow you by the superior nature of my personality and take you all to the Mentors, who will imprison you."

The Grand Dragon and Fargo moved toward each other. They began circling, feinting, and reaching. Suddenly the Grand Dragon lunged and Fargo went head over heels. The Grand Dragon drew back in surprise. Clearly, she hadn't expected that to happen.

Fargo picked himself up with a groan. "She's quick."

Jeff watched the battle with sinking heart. Karate against slippery dragon scales was not working too well. Fargo managed to trip the Grand Dragon, who seemed more surprised than ever when she went down, but once she got back, she retaliated immediately, saying, "If you' are going to be aggressive, so will I."

"The fight isn't fair, Your Highness-ship;" said Fargo gravely. "Your arms are much longer than mine. May I have a short stick?"

"Certainly, since that will make all the more plain your uncivilized nature and force you to abase yourself to my higher culture."

"Norby," said Fargo, "go get the skewer in the galley. You know the one that you were curious about the other day. That ought to be about the right length."

Jeff's eyebrows shot up. The object Norby had been curious about had been an apple picker that Fargo had bought at a tool sale, a sticklike device with a collapsible grasper at one end for plucking apples too high to reach by hand. Fargo would buy anything that was

a bargain, however useless. It was one of the reasons the family business had done so badly after the deaths of their parents.

The battle began again with Fargo wielding the apple picker against the Grand Dragon's sharp foreclaws (which, however, she wielded so carefully that Fargo had not yet been scratched).

They again circled and circled, reaching out, feinting; but the Grand Dragon was obviously getting angry over the fact that Fargo had not yet admitted her superiority and given in. She was puffing smoke in spite of herself and growing angrier still at this demonstration of her animal nature. Fargo took advantage of the manner in which her anger was disrupting her concentration. As she lunged forward, he leaped to one side, caught her arm, pulled her forward, and down she went.

"Bravo!" said Jeff.

"Stupid human being," muttered Norby. "Showing off, when I have told him how to conclude this ridiculous exercise in a perfectly simple way…"

"I'm not sure I should fight a female," said Fargo, pushing back his hair, "but there are no males on this planet for me to fight."

He stopped talking because the Grand Dragon was up, fire spurting out of her nostrils.

"That's very animal," said Fargo, waggling his apple picker at the Grand Dragon's nose.

She stifled the flame, but as Fargo sprang forward, she unfurled her wings and elevated, then made a feint at him from the air.

"Unfair!" shouted Jeff.

"It certainly is," said Fargo, reaching up with the apple picker, activating the grasper at the end and seizing the golden collar which circled her scaly neck-just as such collars circled the necks of every other dragon they had seen. One twist, a pull, and the collar was off.

"Mine!" shouted Fargo, "spoils of war!" He put it around his own neck, where it hung loosely.

Jeff watched what followed in amazement. The Grand Dragon, instead of soaring majestically, began to flap her wings frantically. The enormous effort broke her fall, but did not prevent it. She landed on the lawn with a loud "plop" and in a most undignified posture.

Her guards gaped. Zi and Zargl hid their mouths with their claws. Norby tittered metallically.

"What happened?" asked Jeff.

"This is an antigrav device," said Fargo, touching the collar. "I've been thinking that the dragons must be too heavy to fly, especially with such comparatively small wings, and Norby confirmed that."

"That's right, come to think of it," said Jeff. "They didn't have wings at all in their prehistoric history. Remember?"

"I do. The Mentors must have added them as part of their bioengineering program for esthetic reasons and perhaps to add stability in antigrav flight." Fargo elevated. "It's done mentally. One thinks 'up' and there one is. A great device. Probably Norby has one incorporated into his own works."

"Of course, I do," said Norby shrilly. "I keep telling you all the time I'm Jamyn in origin-in part."

"Now," said Fargo, "I think I'll pay a visit to the castle under my own steam and not as anyone's prisoner."

The the Grand Dragon had recovered from the mixture of shame and physical confusion that had beset her, and now she struggled to her feet. Her guards rushed to her side as she screamed, "Get that stranger! Bring him down!"

"No," said Fargo, skimming over her head. "I think not. I won the fight fairly and you cannot try to upset the result without showing yourself to be most uncivilized. You just sit there and recover, Your Majesty, while I…"

"No you don't," said Jeff. "Not alone, you don't." He snatched up Norby under his left arm and scooped up Oola with his right. "We're all going. Up Norby-to the castle."

10. Villains?

As Jeff and Norby swept up and forward to follow Fargo, who was already approaching the castle door, Jeff saw that the Grand Dragon was vehemently ordering her guard back. Either she had taken seriously Fargo's stem comment about uncivilized behavior, or else she had decided it didn't matter how the strangers were brought to the castle as long as they got there.

Inside the castle, everything seemed the same as before. The four intruders, two humans, one small robot (now on his feet again), and one All-Purpose Pet, proceeded down the dark corridor. around the sharp curve and into the auditorium, which was still lined by the silent figures of dead Mentors. Oola was restless in Jeff's arms.

"Where's the villain?" asked Fargo. "I don't see any live robot. "

His voice echoed in the vast room, and no one answered.

Jeff took Norby's hand, and then Fargo's. -Let's talk telepathically. It will be safer, and perhaps private, but we have to touch each other, Jeff said to their minds.

— What's that? That was Fargo, startled.

— I'm sorry. I forgot you haven't experienced telepathy. Eerie, isn't it?

— Certainly not. That was Norby. His thoughts were loudest because he was designed for telepathy. It is a perfectly natural way of speaking to one another if one has the talent for it.

Jeff smiled to himself. -Yes, but we human beings aren't used to it. Do you sense anything, robot or otherwise, that's alive in this building, Norby?

— I've been trying. I think there's a barrier field around this room at the moment. I can't sense beyond it. It comes from the scanning section of the computer, part of which must be on the back wall, though nothing shows there.

Fargo let go of Jeff's hand and walked quickly toward the back wall. Jeff ran after, pulling Norby with him. He caught up to Fargo, and grabbed him.

— Don't let go of us, Fargo, or we can't communicate privately. And don't touch that wall, or the computer may give our thoughts to the Mentor.

— Jeff, you are fourteen and I am twenty-four. As your much older brother…

— You can also be my stupid brother. I'm the natural leader here, age or not, because I've been here before… -and you got yourself captured. I've been working with the giant computers at Space Command so I ought to…

While they argued (neither managing to finish a sentence), Norby withdrew his legs and arms into his body, elevated on his antigrav, and floated slowly to the featureless computer wall. Jeff and Fargo stopped their mental conversation and watched him as he sailed up and down the wall, over and back.

— What are you doing, Norby?

— He can't hear you now, Fargo, when you talk telepathically. You aren't touching him.

— I forgot. Maybe you should be leader for a while, Jeff.

"I am leader," said Norby out loud. "I can sometimes catch the telepathic drift, even when I'm not touching you. This is my planet, after all, even if I can't remember much, so let me try."

"Try what?" asked Jeff.

"Try using my intuition."

"Do you have one?"

"Not a human one. I seem to have a built-in imagination and the ability to make guesses and take chances. Or maybe being with human beings has taught me how to take chances, even though I certainly don't enjoy it. Still…"

Norby's feeler wire came out and entered a small crack in the surface. Minutes passed. Norby's back eyes closed. Suddenly the crack began to expand and the wall opened like sliding doors. Inside was an opening covered by a misty atmosphere and around the opening was the mechanism of something that might have been a computer, though it was certainly like no computer Jeff had ever seen.

Jeff said so and Fargo added, "Well I've seen a great many more computers than you have, Jeff, but it isn't like any I've seen, either. What is that place inside?"

"That's the scanning room, Fargo," said Jeff with distaste. "Don't go in. It doesn't feel good."

Norby fiddled with the computer and the mist began to clear.

Fargo said, "There's an old beat-up Mentor. What's it doing in the scanning room?"

Jeff stared at the huge figure within the computer. "I don't know. There was no Mentor there when I was inside."

Norby put out his legs and arms and walked back to Jeff. "I must go inside the scanning room. It is necessary."

"Aha," said Fargo, "your alien nature is coming out, Norby. You're not planning to turn us over to the Mentors, are you?" He did not sound as though he were entirely joking.

Jeff fired up at once. "Don't talk to my robot that way, Fargo. He's loyal to us."

"Are you sure?"

"He rescued me from Mentors before, and I would trust him even

if he hadn't."

Norby came closer to Jeff and touched his hand. "Stay here with Fargo, Jeff." -and thank you for trusting me, he added telepathically.

Norby inserted his wire into the computer once more. The mists began to swirl up as the protective field formed, but before it closed in entirely, Norby hopped inside, withdrawing his wire as he did so.

Jeff changed his mind at once, feeling oddly alone without Norby's funny barrel shape in his reach. "I shouldn't have let him go, Fargo. It was a mistake. We've got to get him out of there before he's destroyed."

"Why should he be destroyed? That's not a very brave robot. He wouldn't go in there in a million years if he thought there was danger."

"He's plenty brave in a crisis. Besides, he may have miscalculated. Norby's part Jamyn and if the Mentors made him, perhaps they will try to keep him, or change him or…I don't want that! I want Norby back, just as he is, mixed up and all!"

"Patience, patience," muttered Fargo, studying the computer's complex surface. He touched a few spots. Nothing happened.

"On the other hand," Jeff said, "maybe we should wait and do nothing." He knew he wasn't thinking clearly. He wanted to believe that Norby knew what he was doing, but with Norby, one could never tell when his mixed-up nature might rise to the surface.

Fargo seemed totally absorbed in feeling the odd surface of the computer. He also put his hand out to the mist at the computer entrance and drew it back quickly. "No entry. Strong barrier field. The question is, Can we undo it somehow?" He went on trying.

Jeff finally managed to put it into words. "What if Norby doesn't want to come back with us, Fargo? What if he would rather be on his native Jamya than come back to Earth with me? What if-and what's happened to Oola? I put her down when Norby went inside and now I don't see her."

"Oola," called Fargo. "Here! Come to me!"

"Woof!" She was still beaglelike in appearance as she bounded out of the shadows, ears flapping. She sprang into Fargo's arms, licked his nose, and wriggled in her effort to get down again.

"All right," said Fargo. "You can get down, but don't run away. Stay right here."

She sniffed allover the floor, as if she were looking for something. Then she followed a trail up to the scanner entrance, was blocked by the barrier field, and sat down.

"Oooo-o-o-o."

Jeff's spine tingled at the sound. Oola howled more like a primeval wolf than a beagle. "She must miss Norby," he said, hoping it

was that.

"I feel like howling in frustration; too." Fargo said. "I've fiddled with some things on the surface that seemed promising, and a few that didn't, and nothing happens. I can't figure out this computer. I just can't fit my mind into the alien mind that constructed it."

Oola stood on her hind legs and pressed her nose against one of the little panels marked irregularly over the surface. The mist began to clear at once.

"I touched that one," said Fargo indignantly.

"Maybe it had to be touched by something cold and damp," said Jeff.

Norby was facing them at the opening. "I'm so glad to see you," he said. "I couldn't seem to open the scanner again from inside, and I was afraid that you'd never manage to work the other side. I felt very scared at the thought of having to stay in here forever, because I was having trouble getting out through hyperspace. How did you remove the energy barrier?"

His legs were telescoped out as far as they could go, so that he seemed to be walking on stilts. Indeed, he was walking-moving round and round the immense hulking shape of the silent Mentor, who was sitting on the floor, with his eye patches covered.

"Oola did it," said Fargo. "And what were you doing in there?"

"I was trying to wake him up," Norby said, pointing to the large robot, "but I failed."

Oola bounded inside and, with one leap, landed on the Mentor's shoulder. She settled down and yowled in his ear, her fangs growing and her body altering to look more tigerish.

"She's reverting to her original shape!" Jeff said.

Abruptly the Mentor stood up. "She is mine!" he said. His voice was harsh as if the mechanism for producing it was seriously out of order. His body was covered with discolorations and dents. He seemed even older than the first time Jeff had encountered him.

"If she's yours," demanded Fargo, sounding angry, "what was she doing inside a hassock all these years? You didn't even know where she was. You didn't care for her one bit, and I do. I claim her. Oola, come to me."

Oola jumped down and stood between the Mentor and Fargo, looking anxiously from one to the other, her ears growing first longer and beaglelike, then shorter and tigerlike.

The Mentor's massive head turned to Jeff. "You were here intruding before. You refused scanning, and you would not help me. You will be scanned now, you and this other creature like you."

Fargo stepped between Jeff and the Mentor. "Now just a minute, sir. Not only are you wrong about the All-Purpose Pet, you are wrong

about us. We mean no harm. We have come to find the origins of our own robot, part of whose mechanism may have come from Jamya… Norby, where are you?"

Norby was inside his barrel completely up against the computer. Only his feeler wire was extended and it touched the computer.

Jeff ran to him, "Norby? Are you all right? Answer me!" He bent to touch him and got an electric shock. "Fargo, something's wrong! Norby's tied in to the computer and I can't get him loose!"

"Release our robot, Mentor," said Fargo threateningly.

With that, the Mentor's eyes flashed red. His two right arms seized Fargo about the waist and held him up in the air.

"Monster!" shouted the Mentor. "You interrupted me at important work and I may never…I will not endure this! You will be scanned until everything you know and are becomes part of the computer and your body will be left an empty shell incapable of harming or disturbing me."

Fargo stopped struggling because nothing could break the Mentor's grip. Instead, he laughed, and at that Jeff shook his head. It was Fargo's up-and-at-'em laugh, and it never failed to create trouble.

Jeff stepped up close to the Mentor to try to reason with him, as Fargo had so carefully taught him to do all his life-and as Fargo so infrequently did himself.

It was too late. Still wearing the antigrav collar taken from the Grand Dragon, Fargo rose in the air, carrying the Mentor with him. They swung out into the main auditorium, zooming up into the thick darkness of the high-ceilinged room.

"Fargo, don't!" Jeff called, but Fargo was out of sight in the gloom and did not answer.

"Norby, come out of it. Help me! I can't antigrav without you."

"Meow?" Oola pressed against Jeff's leg and he patted her, absently. As he did so, he became aware of the thin, expandable collar around her neck.

"Oola, can you antigrav?"

"Rowrr?" Oola's fangs disappeared and she looked very much like a Terran housecat, purring against Jeff's leg.

There were terrible noises coming from the darkness overhead, and Jeff, feeling frantic about Fargo, picked up Oola. Holding her close to his chest, he bent his head to hers and thought, very hard, picturing a small cat going up in the air.

Oola meowed once more, and Jeff began to rise. Linking himself telepathically with a not-to-bright All-Purpose Pet that had saber-tooth ancestors was an interesting experience, but difficult to manage. They went up and down, and finally sailed upward-a bit too quickly-toward the Mentor.

The darkness began to separate into distinct shapes, and Jeff could see that the Mentor was still holding Fargo.

Fargo's eyes were shut, his jaw grimly set.

Jeff somehow guided Oola that way. "Don't hurt my brother, Mentor! If you want me to help you…"

Fargo opened one eye, "Shut up, kid. I'm under a strain, trying to do battle with this antiquated hulk, and I have no room to take care of you."

"Why don't you just threaten to let go of your antigrav?"

"Then I fall, too, don't I?"

"Just a little. Fall slowly and let him bang against the floor, then up, then down with another bang, and so on." Jeff had trouble getting the words out, so anxious was he that Fargo understand.

The Mentor understood. He made a sound like gears grinding horribly. "I will let you go, alien monster, if you get me down to the ground. Don't do as the other monster suggests. I am nearly dead and I will be quickly destroyed it there is hard contact with the ground."

Fargo looked at Jeff. Jeff looked at Fargo.

"Let's go down," said Jeff, "Nice and easy." Unfortunately, he didn't count on Oola's reaction. Without warning, she jumped from his arms to the Mentor's shoulder and Jeff found himself in midair without antigrav.

He cried, "Help! I'm falling!"

Fargo yelled, too, as he desperately dropped with the Mentor and tried to snatch at his falling brother.

Jeff was trying to shrink back from the rapidly approaching floor when he felt two hard hands grab him. They were not Fargo's, but the Mentor's. Jeff was hanging from the Mentor's left arms, facing Fargo, who was still wearing the antigrav collar, and was still clutched by the Mentor's two right arms.

Fargo cancelled the fall with such vigor that all three-four, counting Oola-shot upward again.

"Wow!" said Fargo, shaking his head to free his left ear from Oola's enthusiastic licking. "That was close!"

He slapped Jeff's arm and grinned. "Let's all go down slowly, now, and have a reasonable conversation about this. Haven't I always told you, Jeff, that logical argument is better than derring-do?"

"Sure," said Jeff. "You've always told me. What you don't do is show me." His feet reached the floor and the Mentor let go first of Jeff and then of Fargo.

The two brothers watched while the enormous robot, with Oola resting comfortably on his shoulder, clumped slowly back into the scanning room, where Norby still sat inside his barrel. The Mentor sat down and put his head in his hands.

"Suddenly, I'm sorry for him," said Fargo in Terran Basic. "He's such an old robot."

"I think he's Mentor First," said Jeff in Jamyn.

"Yes," said the Mentor, looking up. "How did you know that?"

"We came to see you, long ago, just after you had been activated to do your work here," said Jeff, gently. The Mentor First they'd met then had been so strong, so gleamingly new.

"Surely you could not be alive for so long; we were activated thirty thousand years ago. And I do not remember you," said the Mentor. He said this in Terran Basic.

"You have learned to speak our language!" said Jeff.

"Since you left two weeks ago, the computer analyzed your language and I have learned it-enough to know that you pity me. An alien such as yourself should not take the liberty of pitying me; it is not your place to do so. And yet-and yet I find it strangely comforting. Perhaps, now, you will help me remove this terrible fear I have."

"What is the fear?" Jeff asked softly.

"When you would not help, I scanned you, hoping the computer and I could find out how you got to Jamya." The Mentor's head hung lower, and his body seemed to quiver.

"What's the matter?" asked Fargo. "Are you afraid of us?"

"No, no. I am afraid of myself. I am so seriously out of order that, at times, I am not in a position of mental stability, and the moments-of insanity-have come more frequently. When my Pet came back to me so unexpectedly, I felt myself becoming sane once more, but I don't know how long that will last. If I become insane again, you must leave me here in the scanner. The computer is adjusted to deactivate me if I become too dangerous."

Jeff was horrified. Suddenly the thought of Mentor First as a villain seemed grotesque. He was a sad and suffering machine.

Jeff protested, "But you mustn't kill yourself."

"I must, if I cannot be cured. And I do not think a cure is possible. I am too old. All the other Mentors have died, and I am too much alone. Caring for the Jamyn by myself is more than I can manage and even my Pet has been away from me for too long. We have no means of entering hyperspace to refuel ourselves, you see. The Others wanted to isolate this planet, and they must have thought they would be back long before our enormous supply of fuel would be consumed, but they have not come back."

"And you thought I came from hyperspace," said Jeff, "and could get you into hyperspace where you could refuel-and perhaps find the Others."

"Yes. It is as though you read my mind…But the disturbance in my brain has progressed too far. It is too rate. Go away."

"Then have the computer release Norby. He can help. Norby!" shouted Jeff.

"I heard," came Norby's voice, and his head popped up. He elevated on antigrav and hung in the air before the Mentor.

"I was exploring the computer, Jeff," Norby said. "I'm sorry you thought I was helpless in its grip and that you were upset by that, but I could not allow anything to interrupt me. I'm done now, though, and I'll be glad to help you, Mentor First. I will take you into hyperspace so you can refuel."

The Mentor's eye patches flared in a blue iridescence, but quickly dulled. "You? A small alien robot?"

"I am not alien. I'm yours. You made me. At least partly. Can't you tell?"

"You don't look familiar," said Mentor First. "You are lying."

"Take my hand," said Norby. "Find the data in my mind. It's available now that I've explored the data banks of your computer. I remember-and you will, too."

They touched, and while Jeff watched, his heart thumping, the Mentor's eye patches began to brighten and he reached out his two lower arms to hold Norby's barrel. "You are the Searcher," he said in Jamyn.

"Part of it," Norby said. "When you realized that the Others might not be returning and that you could not go into hyperspace to find them or to refuel, you finally worked out a device that would go into hyperspace for you." Norby spread out his arms. "Inside me is that device."

"You never returned," said Mentor First, softly, "and I thought my attempt to build a hyperpenetrator had failed."

"Your attempt did not fail, and I found the ship the Others had promised to send, but a collision with a small asteroid ruined the ship and damaged me. I lay paralyzed for a long time until a human being named McGillicuddy, a creature like these two with me, explored the asteroid on which the ship and I were wrecked, and found me. He repaired a damaged robot of his own, using some of my parts. Since I have been in this new and beautiful shape, I have been drawn back to Jamya over and over. Now I remember everything and can help you and at the same time, fulfill my original function."

"It is too late, my son, I am dying."

"No! Come with me to hyperspace and refuel."

"I do not think I can. I am too weak to refuel now."

"I'll do it-and channel the energy to you." A wire extended from Norby's hat and touched Mentor First's chest. "Now, father, join minds with me. I will think of hyperspace, and together we will go…" Norby and Mentor First vanished.

11. Pirates!

Oola whined, her ears lengthening. She slunk on her belly over to Fargo.

Stroking her ears, Fargo muttered, "Poor Oola. I guess she's tom between Mentor First and me. And poor me, because I guess if Mentor First lives, I'll end up minus a pet."

"He'd better live," said Jeff, "even if it means you being petless. and he'd better come back with Norby intact, because without Norby, how are we going to get home? The Hopeful will be forever stuck within the energy barrier around Jamya if we can't make use of Norby's mixed-up abilities."

"You're right. But let's be optimistic. When Norby gets back, we'll go out in search of the Others, if they still exist."

"Or, if they don't, we must at least find that wrecked ship of theirs that McGillicuddy stumbled on. No telling what information it might have on it."

"Either way," said Fargo, "whether it's the Others, or their ship, we'd better do the finding before anybody else in the Federation does."

"Absolutely," said Jeff. "We could use that knowledge as ransom for Norby. It's Norby I worry about. Right now, and after we get back home!"

The two waited with increasing impatience. Then Fargo said, "This doesn't seem to be an appropriate time for it, but I'm getting hungry. How about you?"

Jeff said, "I'm a growing boy, superannuated brother. I'm more or less always hungry."

"Too bad. Part of the problem of being organic rather than metal is that one has to refuel so much more often. Do you suppose Zi will feed us if we go down there?"

"Sure, she's a great hostess, but her aunt, the Grand Dragon, will try to chew us up."

"Let me try my charm," Fargo said, sauntering out with Oola in his arms.

Charm or whatever, Jeff thought a while later, it certainly worked.

Fargo, collarless since he had restored her property to the Grand Dragon, had eaten and was now serenading Her Dragonship, who sat in royal splendor against the sunset light of Jamya. She reached out with one careful claw every now and then and ran it through Fargo's hair.

"These are such pleasant scales," she said. "Soft and fine. How did you come to get them?"

"I have noticed," said Fargo, "that they have grown softer and finer since I have had the good fortune to meet you, Your Dragonship."

At this, the Grand Dragon made a gargling sound that seemed to signify gratified pleasure. She was obviously infatuated with him.

With his melodic tenor, Fargo had no trouble acting the part of a troubadour, and was now well into a peculiar translation of "God Save the Queen" which seemed to delight the Grand Dragon.

Jeff lacked Fargo's ability to live in the passing moment, however. He did not enjoy either the food or the song, for he could think only of the absent Norby. Even Zargl, who sat next to him and made fearsome faces at him in an apparent design to make him laugh, failed to cheer him up.

As the sun sank below the trees, the Grand Dragon offered to fly Jeff and Fargo to her palace where they might spend the night. It seemed to the appalled Jeff that Fargo might actually accept the invitation, and he said, "I think we had better stay in the Hopeful, in case our small robot returns."

Fargo, looking guilty for a moment, agreed.

But Norby did not return: The night was very dark because Jamya had no satellite and seemed to be in a section of space rich in cosmic dust that dimmed most of the stars that might have been visible in the sky.

"Fargo," Jeff said, as he lay in the top bunk of their cabin. "I'm so worried I can't sleep:'

Only snores answered him. Fargo could sleep through anything.

Jeff stared gloomily at the darkness above with increasingly dire visions passing through his mind, when he heard Oola's paws plunk against the floor and pad down the corridor to the control room. Apparently, she had leaped down from Fargo's stomach, where she had been curled up when the lights were put out.

Jeff slid over the edge of his bunk, dropped quietly to the cabin floor, and followed her.

"What is it, girl?" he said, scratching her behind the ears. She must have changed into a cattish phase now, for her eyes shone in the dim lights from the control panels.

Crash! A falling object struck the Captain's chair, bounced to the floor, and rolled.

Jeff put on the room light. Out of the falling object, half a head popped up and large eyes peered from under a metal derby hat.

"Norby!" Jeff cried out in sheer joy. The pleasantest sight in the world, it seemed to him, was the little robot appearing out of nowhere, even if he failed to make a good landing. What other robot would be as clumsy as delightful, wonderful, mixed-up Norby?

Norby said, "Sorry, Jeff. I was so upset I forgot to turn on my antigrav when I reappeared from hyperspace. Didn't you get my telepathic message warning you I was trying to get back?"

"No, but I think Oola did."

"That's very annoying," said Norby. "We're going to have to work on your long-distance telepathy…but that's for later. Right now, you've got to wake up Fargo, and both of you had better help me take the Hopeful back to the Terran solar system. After we refueled in hyperspace, the Mentor First and I tuned into the Others' supply ship and found it on an asteroid, but so have the pirates. I came back here to get help."

"What about Mentor First?"

"He's holding off the pirates, and I don't know how long he can do that, so we'd better get to him fast."

"Did I hear you say pirates?" asked Fargo from the doorway.

"I'll say it again. Pirates! Pirates!" yelled Norby. "Let's get going." He grabbed both brothers and all three ran to the computer.

The Hopeful emerged in normal space next to the asteroid.

"Wow-from Jamya slam-bang through hyperspace to my own solar system! And right on target, Norby," said Fargo softly.

"Have you stopped being mixed up?" asked Jeff.

"I'm tuned to Mentor First. Getting us here was easy. Do you have any suggestions as to how to cope with those pirates who are trying to steal the Jamya's supply ship? Look at the size of it!"

Following Norby's pointing finger, Jeff watched the viewscreen intently while Fargo was whispering rapidly to the little robot.

Another ship, tiny by comparison, but larger than the Hopeful was anchored to the small asteroid. Jeff could dimly see the huge outline of a strange wreck on the asteroid, partially hidden by its irregularities. On the asteroid, Mentor First was confronting three men in spacesuits who were holding weapons.

"But are they pirates?" asked Jeff, doubtful. "They could be Federation police."

"No chance," said Fargo. "Those are known pirates; I recognize their ship. They're renegades from the Inventors Union. Up and at 'em."

"With what?" asked Jeff. "The Hopeful doesn't carry weapons."

"You're not up-to-date, little brother. Admiral Yobo insisted that once I became one of Space Command's secret agents, my ship would have to be armed. You and I will go out in suits and distract the pirates, and Norby will plug into system G6YY of the computer. The computer will tell you what to do, Norby."

Norby was plugging in. "Right, Fargo. Are you sure you also want me to notify…"

"Yes, those are my orders. I'm certain," said Fargo hastily, pulling Jeff to the airlock and throwing him a space suit from the three hanging there.

"Fortunately, we don't need antigrav in open space-or on an asteroid either," he added, readying the jet propulsion system of the suit. He and Jeff stepped into the airlock.

"I wish you'd tell me what we're planning to do," said Jeff in exasperation, over the suit's intercom.

"Just follow me."

Jeff followed, landing between the Mentor and the three pirates.

"Howdy," said Fargo. "How about cutting me in on the spoils, boys? If you've found anything, that is."

The pirates were clearly startled at the sudden and unexpected voice in their radio receivers. Apparently they had not been aware of a ship materializing silently out of hyperspace and into their vicinity.

One of the pirate guns turned on Fargo and Jeff, with the clumsiness that attended all movements in open space.

"Who are you?" demanded the pirate.

"Fargo Wells, descended from an ancestor who was tarred and feathered in North Dakota, American sector of the Terran Federation. My buddy here and I are interested in what you found. An old robot?"

"That robot's alive, mister," said the pirate leader, "and it's dangerous. If you want anything out of us besides destruction, you'd better get ready to help us. That thing is holding some gadget that repels our force guns and produces a nasty shock when you get near enough. If you two do something useful, maybe you'll get something in exchange."

Fargo said, "Sounds good, if you can really get something out of an old robot. Is that all you've got here?"

"The wreck of an alien ship, too, that the Inventors Union might pay a lot for."

"Why should they? Is there anything on the ship?"

"That's what we aim to find out, and we don't figure on delaying things with talk. Are you going to help us or do we poke holes in your suits and let out all that nice air?"

"As it happens," said Fargo, "we're attached to our air. My buddy here is a robotics expert, so let him approach that monster."

The three pirates touched fingers and conferred in sound, the waves being carried by the material of the suits. The first pirate, clearly the leader, switched back to radio.

"You have one chance," he said. "If you can handle the robot, fine! If not, say good-bye to each other real fast, because we're not going to wait for you to say your prayers."

Jeff used rocket microsurges to bring himself down to the asteroid

surface and approached Mentor First in the slow, swaying steps enforced by a nearly gravitationless world. He touched Mentor First and said, telepathically and in Jamyn, -Hold on, First, Fargo and I have come to…

— I recognized your ship, said Mentor First telepathically. I am recharged and in much better health, but this weapon is nearly exhausted. I have very few options. I could tear off their suits and kill them, but I cannot bring myself to destroy living things. It is against my programming. And yet I must keep them from taking the ship.

The pirate leader said tensely to Fargo, "How did your pal get past the repulsion field? And is he talking to that thing? How can he talk to an alien robot?"

"Maybe it's not an alien robot," said Fargo. "It could be an advanced experimental gadget of Space Command. My pal would be able to speak to a Command robot. He knows Martian Swahili."

But while Fargo and Jeff had been engaging the attention of the pirates, the Hopeful had been edging closer to the pirate ship. Now the Hopeful plunged outward and away from the asteroid, dragging the pirate ship with it so the pirates would be stranded.

"A force grapple," shouted the pirate leader waving his weapons furiously. "You tell your friends to bring it back or you both die. You have one minute to convince me my ship is being brought back."

"It's mutiny," shouted Fargo, shaking his gloved fist at the Hopeful. "They've taken over our ship, stolen yours, and marooned us all. Killing us won't get you off the asteroid now. We've got to do something fast. If you don't have any ideas, I do."

"Like what?" asked the pirate. His gun lowered as the uselessness of killing Fargo penetrated.

"We persuade this robot, probably a Command robot, to join us and use him…

"You talk Martian Swahili, too?"

"A little."

Fargo, while still talking rapidly and ignoring the guns that were pointing at him, walked over to Jeff and the Mentor. He put his hands on Jeff's suit. -It's a great thing to have linguistic ability, to say nothing of dragon bites. Try to look as though you're talking with Mentor First, and follow my lead.

He called back on radio to the pirates, and said, "My buddy knows how to push this big robot's obedience buttons, so that's no problem, and there's something on the wreck-1 don't know what-that will help us get those ships back. My buddy has to get behind the wreck because there's one piece of equipment…"

He pushed Jeff energetically in the direction of the wreck and continued to talk smoothly and persuasively, while the pirates, unable

to decide what to do, had no choice but to listen.

Hidden behind the alien ship, Jeff found Norby waiting for him with both small ships nearby. He took Norby's hand, and telepathically asked, -What's going on?

Norby responded, -You know Fargo. He's got it all figured out. He wants you to take the Hopeful and place it above the pirates.

— What about you?

— I'll rescue father, and then I have to readjust the Hopeful for some heavy duty lifting before we can lift the Jamyn ship, Norby said, moving off.

Inside the Hopeful, Jeff took off his space helmet and sat down at the controls. He did not have Fargo's touch at manipulating the Hopeful, but spaceships were all but foolproof, thanks to the computers they carried, and Jeff had had at least the preliminaries of an education in spacecraft control.

As the ship came over the pirates, Jeff saw Norby move up unnoticed behind Mentor First, seize one arm, and then lift upward with increasing speed, taking Mentor First with him, while Fargo was busily and energetically engaged in pointing in the other direction.

Norby slid into the Hopeful easily and then helped Mentor First get through the airlock. Fortunately the Hopeful's control room was large.

With deep concern Jeff asked "What about Fargo?"

"He's next," Norby said.

The little robot ejected himself from the Hopeful and looking like a small metal barrel with a lid partly open, hurled himself at the pirates.

Jeff could not tell what the pirates were saying or doing, but they had clearly noticed that Mentor First was gone, and their guns were pointing at Fargo, when one of them noticed Norby speeding down upon them.

As the pirates scattered, Norby grabbed Fargo, zoomed away from the asteroid, and headed back to the Hopeful. And just then, Jeff saw five ships of the Command Fleet approaching, their lights blazing like bright stars in the sky.

12. Hostage

When the airlock closed, Jeff quickly settled the Hopeful behind the large alien ship while Mentor First watched.

"How was that for adventure and drama'" Fargo said jubilantly as he and Norby came into the control room.

"Listen, Fargo, when did you send for the fleet?" asked Jeff with a scowl.

"At the very start, little brother."

"And why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was going to take time for the ships to get here. They don't hypertravel, and I had to jolly the pirates along till then. And you're no actor, kid. You'd have given it away and they'd have shot us down and taken off in their ship."

Norby went immediately to the Hopeful's computer and began to work.

Mentor First shook his odd-shaped head ponderously and made a sound like grinding gears. He said in Terran Basic, "It is important that the wrecked ship be taken back to Jamya."

He was holding Oola, whose loud purr changed into a snarl.

"Doesn't anyone approve?" Fargo asked. "The pirates are beaten and the Command ships will have prisoners. "

Jeff said, "Yes, but you heard Mentor First. We have to go back to Jamya with the Jamyn ship in tow. We can't allow the fleet to take it. That ship is the supply ship the Others had prepared for Jamya, and it has the material needed to rebuild all the inoperative Mentors."

"My world," said Norby, "my people. We can't let the fleet have it."

Fargo looked from one to the other and then shrugged, "I suppose you're right. Jeff, if you and Norby want to link minds with the Hopeful's computer and hyperjump us with the Jamyn ship, I'm willing."

Norby was holding out his hand to Jeff when Admiral Yobo, encased in a regulation fleet spacesuit, opened the control room door and walked in. He stopped, stared at Mentor First, who was even larger than himself, and said, "Someone may have to leave and make room."

Fargo's jaw dropped. "How did you get in?"

"Sorry, Wells, but surely you're not surprised to know that I have the combination of every airlock in the fleet. You've brought us three of the worst renegades on our wanted list and it seemed only right that I thank you in person…"

"That was not necessary, Admiral…"

"And," Yobo went on severely, "I've come here alone to find out what kind of illegalities you're engaged in. You've got a large-sized alien robot, I see, and an alien wreck next to your ship."

Norby jiggled forward and backward on his two-way feet. "We've got to go home, Admiral!"

"Yes, home," said Mentor First.

Yobo looked at the large robot with interest. "It speaks our language, too, and I suspect it belongs to the wreck. Identify yourself, robot."

Jeff quickly stood between Mentor First and the admiral. "This large robot is Norby's father, and we have to take them both home."

"What are they talking about?" Yobo asked Fargo.

"Just what they said."

"Now see here…" Yobo thundered.

Jeff sighed and closed his eyes, reaching for Norby's small hand, while Mentor First's large one came to rest upon his head. Norby must have been touching the control board, too, because Jeff could feel the ship's computer becoming part of the linkage. The augmented force grapple reached the alien ship.

Then, through the sense organs of the computer, Jeff could see the flagship of the fleet, hovering in space near the slowly turning asteroid on which the Hopeful rested.

The admiral was saying something in an indignant shout, but Jeff tuned it out, linking his mind to Norby and Mentor First, visualizing Jamya. The Hopeful trembled slightly and left the Terran solar system with the alien ship in tow.

"Ah, well," said Admiral Yobo, leaning forward to take the last cookie-after being assured that they were cookies-"one can't have everything. I was thinking only this morning that I need a vacation badly, and I suppose a picnic on this lawn can count as one."

Jeff grinned at Fargo with relief, but Fargo did not smile. Oola was reclining on Mentor First's lower arms while Zi talked animatedly to him. The Grand Dragon hovered near Admiral Yobo with a sparkling red smile because she had put ruby caps on her fangs in honor of the occasion. On the other side of Yobo, little Zargl nuzzled his chest under his medals.

"Oh, Admiral," gurgled Zargl, "you are the largest and most magnificent human being I've seen. Surely you are the leader of them all."

"Dragons or not," Fargo said, "that's women for you."

"You didn't mind when she switched from me to you," Jeff said.

"That was just good sense. This isn't. And look at Oola making up to Mentor First."

"Come on, Fargo. He designed her and he was her original master.

Don't be so jealous."

"I'm not," said Fargo. "I'm devoted to Albany Jones and she's allergic to cats and that probably included modified smilodons."

"You're devoted when you remember to be," Jeff chided.

"I can't help distractions. I'm young, handsome, musical, brilliant- and, if we don't get the admiral back to Space Command soon- unemployed again."

Admiral Yobo rose splendidly from the cushions which had been brought hastily from the palace for the enjoyment of the Terran aliens. "Gentlemen! Ladies!" He bowed to the Grand Dragon, whose emotions caused her to breathe so hotly upon his uniform that Yobo was forced to move back a trifle.

He continued, "This has been a delightful repast and I am proud to be considered as acting ambassador from the Terran Federation, but I'm afraid that we Terrans must return to our own solar system. By now, our fleet must be convinced I have been somehow destroyed."

Mentor First, after some hesitation, held out his top right hand to the admiral, who, after an equal hesitation of his own, took it with his right hand.

"It is generous of you," said Mentor First, "to agree so readily to leave the wrecked supply ship with us after it became clear that you had no way of taking it with you."

"It's called practical politics," said Yobo, "and is much practiced in the Terran solar system."

Mentor First said, "Now that you three have consented to the Jamyn bite, and therefore understand our language, we make you honorary Jamyn, co-equal with the dragons and the Mentors, the two intelligent species on this planet."

"Thanks," said Yobo, "but…"

"Furthermore, we will work on our wrecked ship, and when we understand its hyperdrive mechanism, we will bring it to the Federation as our gift for the start of trade between our two civilizations."

"And that means, Admiral," said Jeff eagerly, "that Norby would be able to stay with me. He won't be in danger from the Inventors Union once the Federation understands that we will be getting hyperdrive soon."

"We also want miniantigrav," said Yobo, his dark face solemn.

"Sir," said Jeff. "I don't want Norby to be put in danger of destruction…"

"Cadet," said Yobo, "I don't either: In fact, you'll remember that I came to warn you against the aims of the Inventors Union. That, however, was before I traveled through hyperspace. It's a spectacular achievement, and the Federation should not be deprived of this

technique simply because of one unimportant robot. We will do everything we can to inflict no permanent damage upon him, but Norby must be examined by our scientists."

"No," said Jeff, I don't trust anybody with Norby!"

Mentor First put down Oola, whose strange fur was standing on end. He stood up, taller even than Yobo. The atmosphere of the party suddenly chilled.

"Norby is my son," said Mentor First. "He can trust only me. Jamya is his home, and I need him here to work on the wrecked ship."

"But Mentor…" began Jeff, only to stop as the Mentor's eye patches flared red.

"Norby will stay here!"

The Grand Dragon, abandoned by Admiral Yobo, puffed out a cloud of smoke that set everyone to coughing except the two robots. Then she turned to lean heavily upon Fargo's shoulder and began to stroke her claws gently through his hair.

"You are silly, all of you," she said. I have a plan."

"Ma'am?" said Jeff, hopefully.

"Have you all forgotten that none of you Terrans can go home unless Norby adjusts your ship to go through hyperspace? You cannot go to your own planet if you leave Norby here, so he must go with you. In that case, we Jamyns must take precautions to make sure that Norby is returned to us unharmed, and before very long."

"What do you suggest, madam?" asked Yobo with an impressive roll to his deep voice.

The Grand Dragon put her claws around Fargo and lifted him off the ground as she rose on her antigrav. "Fargo will stay here on Jamya as my hostage until Norby returns safely."

Before anyone, even Fargo, could object, the Grand Dragon flew rapidly over the trees and disappeared with Fargo in the direction of her palace.

"Norby!" said Jeff, "take me to the palace so I can get Fargo back."

"No," said Mentor First, holding Norby. "The Grand Dragon is quite correct. If Norby must leave, then Fargo must stay here till he returns."

Oola was acting strangely, her fangs lengthening and then getting shorter as she changed shape back and forth from tiger to beagle. Finally, she barked, whined and rose on her own antigrav. She licked Mentor First's bulbous head, and as he reached for her, evaded his grasp and flew off in the direction of the palace.

Mentor First folded all four of his arms. "So! Divided loyalty!"

"Father," said Norby. "Oola and I are both mixed up. She was made from animals that originated on Earth, but she was made by you, a Jamyn robot. And I am part Jamyn-and part a Terran robot. My

loyalty is divided, too."

"Good," said Yobo, "then listen to your Terran part and come back to cooperate with our scientists, Norby."

"No," said Mentor First, "listen to your Jamyn part and, after you return these Terrans, come back to help me."

Norby closed all four of his eyes and withdrew into his barrel.

Jeff wanted to say, "Please stay with me, Norby," but could not. Norby had too many beings wanting him for their own purposes.

— You want him not for any purpose but your love for him. The thought was that of Zi, who was touching Jeff's arm gently, and who had apparently sensed his thought.

Jeff smiled at her and nodded. He noticed that Mentor First's eye patches were still red, and that Admiral Yobo's chin was sticking out grimly.

— Zi, we were all so friendly for a while!

— The friendship is still there. As is my friendship for you.

— But Mentor First and Admiral Yobo seemed filled with hatred of each other. Look at them!

— Then do something about it, young Terran. Find a solution!

— That is so easy to say, Zi, but I can think of nothing.

Jeff felt very young and very unhappy. Admiral Yobo wants Norby's miniantigrav and hyperdrive, he thought. Mentor First wants his son, and to restore the other Mentors. Fargo wants the freedom to have adventures. And Norby?

Norby wants to be with a robot he considers his father, and that's worst of all. At least, for Jeff it was worst of all.

"Mentor First," said Jeff, "how is it that only Norby can fix things for you? He's not really good at it on Earth, and when you first realized who he was, you called him 'the Searcher.' He was designed to find the wrecked ship, and he has now found it. His job is over. Why can't you repair the hyperdrive and work out its mechanism without him?"

"I cannot do that."

"But you gave Norby his hyperdrive mechanism. How was that?"

Mentor First seemed to be trying to remember. "I installed Norby's device for refueling from hyperspace. I know that. It seems to me, though, that one of the other Mentors, just before he became totally deactivated, was the one who actually installed the search mechanism that enables Norby to travel through hyperspace."

"But you were the Mentor leader, with the best mind among them. If the other Mentor understood about hyperspatial drive, you must have, too."

"I cannot remember," said Mentor First.

Jeff tried again. "Well, then, what about the replacement

mechanisms for all the Mentors? Now that you have them at last, and can bring them all back into existence, why not do so and have them help you?"

Mentor First said sadly, "Thinking is not easy for me-I have been half-demented for so many years. Perhaps you are correct, young Terran, but Norby is my creation-like a son-and still belongs here."

Jeff bit his lip, while Norby stayed in his barrel. Zi's thought came again.

— Courage. We dragons will help the Mentors heal themselves. It is time for you Terrans to leave.

— But when we are back home, Norby will come here again and stay here. He will leave me.

— After all, that is his choice, is it not?

Norby's legs extended and he bobbed up and down. His arms came out and rested on his barrel. Apparently he had come to a decision.

"All right," he said as his head popped up, "I'll just take these Terrans home, and then return."

Already, thought Jeff, we are nothing but a bunch of Terrans to him and he doesn't care about being my partner. Aloud he said, "What about Fargo?"

"He must stay as hostage," said Mentor First. "I am sorry, but I cannot trust you, Admiral.".

"Nor can I trust you," said Yobo, starting for the Hopeful, "On our way, Cadet. On the double!"

Jeff ran. Norby stumbled after, complaining loudly until he evidently remembered that he had antigrav, for he withdrew his legs and sailed past Jeff into the Hopeful just after Yobo.

He didn't even look at me as he passed, thought Jeff. He doesn't like me anymore.

"Good-bye, Jeff," said Zargl.

"Take care of yourselves," said Zi. " And take this as my gift."

She spread her wings, caught up with Jeff, and tossed him a gold collar.

"Don't try to keep Norby," said Mentor First, his four arms folded against his heavy body.

Jeff stopped at the airlock of the Hopeful and glared back at the Mentor. "Just you remember to tell the Grand Dragon that Fargo is my brother-and my best friend."

The airlock door closed behind Jeff, and he heard a small metallic voice say, "I used to be that."

Jeff gulped. Past tense. Could he change it?

13. Useful Time Trouble

"I'm sorry, Cadet," said Yobo as Jeff sat down in Fargo's chair in the control room. "I was perhaps a bit undiplomatic in the matter of Norby, and I've alienated Mentor First needlessly."

"I would like to trust you, Admiral," said Jeff.

"I would rather you understood me, Cadet. My first duty is to the Terran solar system. I want the secret of hyperdrive and I must have it before anyone else gets it; in particular, before the Inventors Union does. The Union was founded for praiseworthy purposes, I suppose, but it has been increasingly taken over by militant radicals, who want to use their inventions for the establishment of power."

"Do you suppose they plan a revolution and to take over the Federation?"

"It's my job as head of Space Command to see to it that they don't. And if I'm to do that properly, Norby's talents can't be viewed as amusing toys anymore. They have become vital. We must have his secrets."

"You'll be killing the goose that lays the golden egg, sir. Norby, intact, would be far more useful to the Federation than any of his parts would be."

They both looked at Norby, who was plugged into the Hopeful's computer.

"Ready to go back to the Terran solar system, Admiral?" asked Norby.

"Yes. Take me to Space Command Spome."

"Do you need my help in visualizing it?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Norby.

"Admiral," Jeff said, "please watch the monitor viewscreen closely so that you can tell us exactly where to go to drop you off."

Once the admiral was occupied in that fashion, Jeff leaned forward and touched Norby.

— You haven't taught me long-distance telepathy, so I've had to distract the admiral to keep him from watching us touch. I'm sorry that we can't trust him any more than we can trust Mentor First.

— My father is trustworthy!

— They both are, under ordinary conditions, Norby, but they both want something desperately, and that's you. They want to use your talents, find out your secrets, because for each of them, a world is at stake.

— That's true, Jeff. Mentor First wants hyperdrive before Terrans have it, because he is afraid of Terrans. I made the mistake of giving him a short telepathic course in human history. He was particularly

appalled at my personal experience with the lions in the Roman Coliseum. I tried to explain that human beings have improved in behavior since then, but the fight with the pirates convinced him that you are all dangerous.

— That was thoughtless of you, Norby. What you told him of us made him suspicious and defensive, which encouraged Yobo to grow suspicious and defensive, and I just wonder if anyone will ever be friendly again.

— You won't have to be mad at me for long, Jeff. I'll take you home and then bring Fargo back, and then I'll go to Jamya where I'll be safe.

Jeff let go of Norby and put his hand over his eyes. I've messed things up even worse, he thought.

He was suddenly aware of something on his forearm. He looked down at it and discovered that the gold collar Zi had thrown to him circled it. He had put it on absently and promptly forgotten it.

"Admiral!" he said, awed. "See here. You won't have to use Norby! This collar is a powerful antigrav device. Take it to your scientists and let them use it to work out the mechanism for mini-antigrav. And from that they might get hyperdrive without trouble."

Yobo grunted and took the collar. "How does it work?"

Jeff said, "Imagine yourself moving up."

Yobo did, and his head hit the ceiling with an audible thump. He yelled and must have visualized dropping again, for he hit the floor with a considerably louder thump. He sat there, looking pained. "I accept the mini-antigrav part, but what makes you think that will lead us to hyperspatial travel?"

"Fargo thinks it will."

"Fargo is not a theoretical physicist, but an overgrown adolescent. I still must have Norby. My duty to the Federation…"

"Ready?" asked Norby. "I can't keep my mind properly adjusted forever. "

"Just a minute," said Jeff, thinking furiously. "I know you said you could hyperjump back to any solar system yourself, but I don't want you to. If you have to be taken over by the scientists of the Fleet or leave Earth for good, I must, either way, learn the technique of hyperspatial travel to the point where I can do it without you in a ship like this, adjusted for it."

Quickly, before Yobo or Norby could say anything, Jeff tuned into the controls of the computer and reached out to touch minds with Norby.

— You're up to something, Jeff.

— You bet I am, Norby. Take us into hyperspace, and then out of it to Earth, like this. Jeff visualized it for Norby, who chuckled.

As the Hopeful leaped out of the space-time of Jamya, Jeff felt the usual odd sensation inside himself. It was much worse than usual, almost as though something had turned over in his abdomen, but that might only have been because he was nervous about what he was doing.

The admiral said, "Very good, we're in the solar system. but where's Space Command? I don't see any spomes anywhere."

"Perhaps," said Jeff, "we missed the solar system. We may be in the planetary system of another star."

"Nonsense," said Yobo, "that's the moon over there. It's quite as usual. And directly ahead is Earth. Those are Terran cloud formations. I've studied them for decades. And if there's any question…Can this visiscreen be adjusted for microwave emission and reception? Yes, I see it can."

He made the necessary adjustments. "We can look through the cloud cover and see the continents. Although clouds can be mistaken, continents cannot be."

Even as he spoke, the swirls of white clouds that hid the blueness of Earth's atmosphere thinned and disappeared, and the Earth's globe turned into a circle of ruddy artificial color in which red continents showed up against a black ocean.

Yobo's breath came out in a large whoosh, as though he had been bashed in the abdomen. It was a minute or so before he could say in a strangled way, "There's no Atlantic Ocean. There's one big continent. If that's Earth-and it must be because the moon is still unmistakable-we're 250 million years ago."

Jeff stared at the viewscreen. "Interesting."

"Interesting?" Yobo didn't quite gnash his teeth, but if he had had fangs, he might have shown them. "You and that idiot robot of yours haven't just moved the Hopeful across hyperspace-you've moved it in time as well."

Jeff said, "I'm afraid that's part of Norby's mixed-upness, Admiral. Sometimes he takes you right where you want to go and sometimes…"

"Sometimes he doesn't! That is horribly obvious, Cadet. Since when have you known that Norby gets mixed up in time as well?"

"Well, he was reading history…"

The admiral waved Jeff to silence and shook his finger at Norby, whose back eyes were staring at Yobo with equal innocence. "Listen, you Jamyn robot. Did that sick Mentor make you capable of traveling through time as well as through hyperspace? Is this something that Mentor First planned?"

"No, sir." The domed hat slid down until only the tops of Norby's eyes were peering out at the admiral in his wrath. "I think that McGillicuddy did something that caused this talent of mine."

"Talent? It's a liability!"

"It's Norby's other secret," said Jeff. "The only trouble is that he can't seem to go to any time period when he existed-at least not easily-and he can't go into the future."

"You mean we can't get back to our own time?"

"Oh, no, sir. I mean he can't go into the future from our present-the present we used to be in. I mean…"

"I know what you mean, Cadet. Don't confuse me. Is this-talent-controllable?"

"Not exactly, sir. Time traveling keeps getting mixed up with space traveling, and we hardly ever go directly where we want to."

The admiral sat down against the visiscreen, his huge shoulders slumped and an expression of dismay on his broad face.

"Tell me, you miserable robot and you ridiculous human being, is there any slight possibility of my being taken forward to a time when human beings exist on Earth?"

"Yes, sir," said Jeff. "Norby-let's try."

"Aye, aye, Captain," said Norby, overdoing it as usual.

The Hopeful shivered and shook, and so did Jeff. What if he and Norby got things so mixed up that they were all lost forever?

"I can't see a thing," said Yobo as he peered at the visiscreen. "You've brought us close enough to Earth to be inside the cloud cover. That's dangerous, a little closer and…"

Jeff said hastily, "I'll bring the Hopeful closer through ordinary space. There'll be no danger."

The Hopeful poked her nose out of the cloud and the visiscreen magnified the ground. They were over a continent; in fact, they were over a city. In view were buildings and people.

Jeff said, "We're back to human beings and civilization, Admiral. "

Norby said, "And the Coliseum. Jeff, it's Roman times again. We tied into where and when I was before, so maybe now I'll get to see how that gladiator came out in the fight. They took me to the lion cage just when the fight was starting. Big husky fellow, that gladiator. Reminds me of you, Admiral."

"You mean to say," said Yobo, apparently suppressing a snarl, "that your fascination with this period of history had caused what passes for a mind in that tin hat of yours to get mixed up and drag all of us into Roman times just so that you would have a chance to find out what happened to a gladiator?"

"I didn't exactly mean to do it, sir," said Norby. "I mean, even if I'd intended to do it, I couldn't always guarantee that I could. It's not my fault that I've got emotive circuits and imagination and special talents that get mixed up. I can't help being different from other robots."

Jeff manipulated the controls of the Hopeful and the little ship

rose back into the clouds. Hiding a smile, he said, "I think we'd better go someplace else. We don't want to be seen and cause any changes in history."

"Changes in-history?" The admiral mopped his brow. "I suppose that if our scientists tried to copy talents such as this, we'd end up with the constant danger of messing up the past and changing history in such a way that none of us would exist?"

"I think you're right," said Jeff. "Maybe the whole human race wouldn't exist." He touched Norby.

— Mission accomplished, Norby.

— Right, Jeff. He's convinced I'm unreliable.

— Well, you are, aren't you?

— Not really. It's just that…

— Never mind. Now let's really go home.

Only they didn't.

"Where are we now?" Yobo asked weakly.

"Norby," Jeff asked, "where are we?"

Norby was plugging himself into various parts of the computer rather frantically. "I don't know, Jeff. You got my emotive circuits stirred up and something's gone wrong."

"Can't see a thing in the visiscreen," said Yobo. "Everything is all shiny and vague."

"The screen's polarized," said Jeff in horror. "The light outside is so strong that the Hopeful is compensating for it by not letting it show on the visiscreen. And the instrument panel shows that the outside of the hull is getting hotter and hotter."

"I think we're stuck, Jeff," said Norby, his voice tinny.

"Unstick us," yelled Jeff. "We humans won't be able to live much longer if the heat goes any higher!"

"Neither will I," said Norby. "I have delicate brain mechanisms."..

"Then put them to work on solving this problem," roared Yobo.

Jeff's head was pounding and he had never been so frightened in his life. "Have we come inside a star?"

"No, Cadet. Impossible! We'd be dead in a microsecond."

"Then where…Look, Admiral, the readings show a gravitational pull on us. We're being dragged in, or down, somewhere."

"I have deciphered the incoming data," said Norby importantly, "and this is the situation. We are quite close to a star much dimmer than Earth's sun, close enough so that it is heating us rapidly and is pulling at us strongly."

"And we are spiralling inward under that pull," said Jeff. "Norby-get us out of here quickly."

"But Jeff, my circuits are resonating improperly. I can't."

Jeff touched him.

— Norby, I bought and paid for you, and until you go back to Jamya, you are my robot. Join minds with me and we'll both try to move the Hopeful back into hyperspace.

— But Jeff, we're both mixed up when it comes to time travel.

— We tried to show how mixed up we were to fool the admiral. But now we're in trouble, and it serves us right. So let's try to move again and let's try not to be mixed up.

They touched each other and the control panel and suddenly Jeff felt as if he were the Hopeful herself.

He was not Jefferson Wells. He was not Norby. He was just the ship, fighting to save her life and the lives of three sentient beings she carried-and winning.

"Oof!" said Yobo, rubbing his bald head. "That was a rough trip."

"We're out!" Jeff picked up Norby and jumped around the control room. "We did it!"

"This is our own time exactly," said Norby proudly, his little arms waving triumphantly.

"Quiet!" roared Yobo. "I see Space Command ahead, and I have never before thought it to be the most beautiful object in the Universe, but I certainly think so now. Take me home."

The great artificial world of Space Command Spome, the circling wheel of the fleet's space home (for which "spome" was the universally used term), hung like a brilliant three-dimensional pattern in the blackness of space.

In the distance was Mars, around which the spome circled, and Jeff could see the lights of the small shuttle boats going back and forth. People took shuttles because the transmits were so expansive, but soon, with hyperdrive, human beings would be able to spread through the galaxy and establish a great empire of the stars.

— Maybe that's not such a great idea, Jeff. Jeff was still holding Norby.

— The Mentors will be traveling, too, Norby. There will be room for both of us.

— And I'll be a sort of go-between, won't I. I'm part both, aren't I, Jeff?"

Jeff laughed.

— Well, let's assume an optimistic attitude, Norby. Or at least have a sense of humor about it. Everything might go well.

But Admiral Yobo shouted impatiently, "Let's get a move on, Cadet!"

14. Forever Mixed

Norby was gone!

Jeff waited disconsolately in the old Wells apartment on Manhattan Island, Earth. He stared out the window at Central Park, where the leaves were turning to gold and flame because it was now autumn. The dying of the year seemed to resonate inside his chest and he felt as though something were dying within him, too.

Admiral Yobo had sworn strict confidentiality concerning Norby's other secret. In fact, the admiral had shuddered and said, "I will never mention to anyone that your robot is capable of time travel. If he's the only being in the universe capable of it, I would be relieved. If even he were not capable of it, I would be still more relieved."

"I understand, sir."

"So we can forget about having our scientists go through him to dig up things too dangerous for anyone to have. In fact, if he weren't useful and your friend, I would be tempted to put him into a stasis chamber," he had said.

"No, sir. Please don't do that."

The admiral ignored the plea. "We can only wait and hope that the Mentors will consider being friends with the Federation and give us the secret of the Others' hyperdrive."

"I'm sure the fleet scientists will discover hyperdrive for themselves just as quickly."

"Probably. They've already expressed optimism over the matter of the gold collar, and that's the first step, I suppose. Just keep your robot out of their way so that there won't be any missteps!"

Norby and Jeff returned to Earth from Space Command. The admiral himself paid their transmit fees because he said he didn't want Jeff to risk going anywhere with Norby through hyperspace.

And now Norby was-Jeff hoped-back on Jamya, where Fargo was, presumably, in the Grand Dragon's castle dungeon. He pictured his older brother looking wan and emaciated and longing for Earth. If only Norby would be able to persuade the Grand Dragon and Mentor First to set Fargo free! Then if he could bring Fargo safely back, and not end up with him on some other planet or in some other time…

"Ouch!" It was a familiar voice.

"Fargo!" shouted Jeff in pure joy. "Norby got you out of Jamya!"

"Hi, Jeff," said Fargo, matter-of-factly, picking himself up from the floor and rubbing his rear end violently. "What was your hurry, Norby?" he asked. "I was just beginning dessert when you appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me into hyperspace."

Fargo was resplendent in a crimson garment with a full cape that

was spangled with gold slivers. He wore a gold belt, crimson shoes, and a flashy diamond ring. He did not look at all emaciated. In fact, he might have gained a pound or two.

"Jeff was worried about you, I'm sure," said Norby through his hat as he rolled across the floor, all his limbs retracted. His head popped up and he righted himself with his feet out. "He probably thought that Her Dragonship had you imprisoned in the lowest dungeon under the castle moat."

"Imprisoned? I'd been serenading her in the most impressive room in her palace and we were well into another banquet, so couldn't you have waited till after dinner?"

"Another banquet?" wailed Jeff. At fourteen, one feels hungry much more often than a twenty-four-year-old brother can appreciate.

"Yes," said Fargo. "A special feast in honor of a song I wrote especially for her highness."

"Fargo, old pal," said Jeff, through his teeth, "I don't suppose you mind that I was concerned about you, but Albany hasn't been getting much attention from you lately."

Fargo had the grace to blush. He said, "Well, I'll go and see her just as soon as I wash up. You call her at the department and let her know I'm back. Oh, and I had time to grab a present for you before Norby dragged me away into hyperspace and home. Here!"

Fargo tossed Jeff something green and leathery that resembled a miniature hassock about the size of a baseball.

"Oola's egg!" said Jeff. "It couldn't be anything else."

"Right on," said Fargo. 'This female pet will be yours."

"No beagles? Not that I dislike beagles," said Jeff hastily, because he didn't, "but I have wanted a kitten."

"You may get one with saberteeth, if you're not careful," said Norby sourly. "That hassock grows slowly until the All-Purpose Pet is ready, so you'd better keep it with you and influence it by thinking constantly of friendly kittens. You'll undoubtedly like it better than you do me."

Jeff felt a leap of hope in his mind, but he tried not to put pressure on Norby. He opened his mouth to reply but could think of nothing.

"Close your mouth, Jeff. I haven't finished telling you about All-Purpose Pets. When they're upset enough, they grow a leather shell around them, and then you can't get them out-perhaps for generations-until you sing the right song, and only they know what the right song is."

"Like the first Oola," said Jeff, turning the egg in his hands.

"Call this one Oola Two," said Fargo.

"I will."

"Huh," said Norby. "I suppose our apartment will soon be overrun with green critters."

"Oh?" said Jeff. "You said you were going home to Jamya."

"Where's home?" asked Norby, shutting his eyes that faced Jeff. He stomped noisily across the floor to the main computer terminal and tuned it to a particularly idiotic puzzle game.

Fargo looked at Jeff, who gulped again and pretended to be absorbed in Oola's egg. He could not beg Norby to stay, nor order him. Norby was no longer his possession, but his partner, and the decision had to be up to Norby alone.

"Maybe you've got two homes, Norby," said Fargo gently. "How about using both?"

Norby turned off the game and shut all four eyes. "Maybe nobody wants me."

There was something in Jeff's throat and, when he tried to speak, he croaked.

"Well, well," said Fargo, stretching. "I think I'll have to leave this to you two to settle. I'm going to wash and change my clothing. Albany believes in utilitarian clothing and disapproves of men wearing diamonds."

"How about gold belts?" said Jeff, getting his voice back. Out of the comer of his eye he saw Norby's metal eyelids snap up. Jeff took a deep breath.

"Oh, that," said Fargo carelessly, unhooking the one he was wearing and tossing it to Jeff. "That's a special antigrav belt the grand dragon had ordered for me. We'll take turns at it until the fleet scientists design some of their own."

Norby snatched the belt from Jeff and handed it back to Fargo. "No," he said. "You keep it, Fargo, Jeff won't need this. He'll have me most of the time."

Jeff let out the breath and picked up Norby.

Fargo smiled and said, "I'm in charge of this family, Norby, and perhaps I should have doubts about you. It took you a long time to get the Hopeful back to Space Command. Didn't you almost lose my ship- and my brother and my admiral?"

"On purpose," said Jeff, holding Norby tightly, "So Yobo would see him as unreliable and not want him."

Norby jiggled his head up and down in assent. Then he grabbed onto Jeff's arm and said, "It gave me time to think, and I decided that I could visit Jamya and my father, but what I really wanted after all was to stay with Jeff. He is my friend."

"I see," said Fargo, "but I suspect that you're just as mixed up as ever, Norby."

Norby said, "I'm afraid so," and one of his eyes that faced Jeff

closed its metal eyelid in an exaggerated and tremendous wink.

"Norby," said Jeff. "You're my friend, too, and I want you just the way you are, forever mixed up."